Key to His Heart
Gay Romance
Trina Solet

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By Trina Solet

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Chapter 1

After years of separation, of not speaking, he was finally hearing from Tony. Phillip could take a good long look at his little brother while he talked. There was Tony with his curly, light brown hair, lively brown eyes, smiling, with an irrepressible spirit shining through.

Phillip was the boring older brother wearing a suit, hair short, and gray eyes that were always too serious. Both brothers did have their father's long fingers, but Tony's were never still, always tapping and fiddling with anything he could get his hands on. Phillip could see him doing it right now. Tony was flipping a pen over his knuckles, almost dropping it a few times.

Phillip watched those familiar tics with rapt attention, but sometimes he couldn't see Tony very well through the tears that clouded his vision. The video he was watching came from Tony's phone. He made it just in case then sent it to his lawyer.

Just in case...

Tony died in a car crash two weeks ago. Driving too fast and under the influence when he crashed, it was pure luck that he hadn't taken anyone with him. The wreck had killed him on impact. This video was the last time Phillip would hear or see his little brother.

Phillip sat alone in the shabby conference room at Mr. Poller's law office. Trying not to let grief overwhelm him, he watched and absorbed every word. He didn't want the video to end. He wanted to sit there and watch Tony fidget, scratch his chin now and then, and smile disarmingly.

Every characteristic gesture broke Phillip's heart a little more, brought back memories of his brother as a little boy. Tony always leaned forward slightly when he talked, like he was confiding something to you and it was very important. It was Tony so he also rambled a bit before he got to the point.

"At first I was thinking I'd write this down. I figured you'd appreciate a letter so I sat down to write all of it. Had a big yellow legal pad in front of me and a pen in my hand, but you know me." Tony shrugged, shook his head and grinned. "So now you get to look at my pretty face while I yammer on."

Tony talked about a girl. "There was something about her. She really got to me, but Tara had some problems. I thought I could save her. I didn't do such a good job." Tony sighed and looked down then raised his eyes to the camera again. "Now for my big news. Tara didn't stick around. She dropped a bomb on me that she was preggers then ran off. That was a while ago now. I've been looking for her ever since. She went by the name Tara West when I knew her, but that turned out to be fake. So far I haven't been able to track her down. What happened in Missouri makes me worry that I might never get around to it. I had a little rollover. I didn't come out of it too bad. But it got me thinking how anything can happen to me. I live just a little over the speed limit." Tony grinned, but Phillip felt sick.

He could see the evidence of what happened in Missouri on Tony's face and on his head. He had cuts and bruises and his curly hair had been shaved right over his right temple. Every time Tony turned his head, Phillip could see the ugly red gash and the stitches keeping it closed.

If that accident was a warning, why didn't Tony listen? Phillip didn't have time to dwell on that as Tony continued speaking.

"Somewhere out there I have a kid. If anything happens to me, I want you to find him or her and make sure my kid is taken care of. I might beat you to it. Hope I do. Maybe I'll be coming over to show off my progeny, the fruit of my loins, hear the little squirt call you Uncle Phil." Tony chuckled then grew more serious. "The way I'm living plenty of things might happen before I ever set eyes on that kid of mine. So you're my insurance policy. Be my big brother one more time. Find my kid for me. Do it for old time's sake. Do it for that little boy who used to run after you and hang on your every word even if he didn't always do what you told him to," Tony said with a new urgency to his voice and a smile.

In that moment, Phillip saw him as the disobedient little boy he used to be. He could hear him squeal and run away because he had been told it was bath time or bedtime or some dreaded vegetable was being served for dinner.

For a while, Phillip was lost to that vision. Tony was running down the hall, feet kicking, curls bouncing, screaming because bedtime was the end of the world. His parents were telling Phillip to go catch him, but he couldn't catch that little boy now any more than he could bring his brother back to life.

"Be my big brother one more time." Those words hit Phillip so hard. The agony in his chest wouldn't subside as Tony's voice still echoed in his head – casual but earnest, so familiar, so real. How could Tony be gone when he was so alive and didn't know how to sit still even as he was telling Phillip something like this.

Phillip felt like he could reach through the laptop screen and touch warm skin and unruly hair. Of course he would be his big brother. He would always be Tony's big brother. Phillip knew that in his heart as it filled with grief and pain at every heartbeat. Tony grinned one final time, the video stopped playing, and Phillip sat in that conference room and convulsed with silent sobs.

Phillip didn't know how long he sat in front of his open laptop. Long enough for the screen to go dark. Even after he stopped crying uncontrollably, he didn't move. He sat like he was frozen. Only the thought of what he needed to do brought him out of it.

This might be the last time he got to do anything for Tony. He started by going to speak to the lawyer, Mr. Poller. He was elderly and called himself semi-retired. He seemed to have known Tony personally.

Coming out of the conference room, feeling numb, Phillip knocked on his

office door.

"Come in. I have here what your brother left for you." Sitting behind his desk, Mr. Poller put aside an open file and picked up two others. He invited Phillip to have a seat. "Last year, Tony and my nephew's boy got into some trouble together, drag racing." He sighed. "I got them out of it with a fine and time served. After that Tony came to me with the information about this girl known as Tara West, and he also recorded the video that you saw. He left with me everything he had on the girl, which isn't much. Since he moved around so often, he wanted the information kept safe."

Mr. Poller handed him the two files. Phillip flipped through some printouts quickly, lingered over the photos of a young woman. She was blond with weary, blue eyes. In some of the photos, she was with Tony. He had his arm around her and wore his cockiest grin. As he stared at the photos, Phillip felt too overwhelmed to actually take in any information that was in front of him. The photos of Tony smiling so confidently were too painful to see.

Mr. Poller must have noticed his state of agitation because he summed up a few things for him without being asked. "Tony met her in Augusta at some party. She was partying pretty hard. Some guys took an interest in her. She wasn't in any condition to do much about it so Tony stepped in. He got her away from them. He took her home and they began a rather stormy relationship. They stayed together for less than six months. After she left town, he couldn't find any sign of her. Tony managed to hire two private investigators over the last few years, but neither of them got very far before Tony's money ran out."

Phillip could imagine what kind of private investigators Tony could afford to hire. But one question lingered on his mind. "I don't mean to be cynical, but did these private investigators find any evidence that this woman was really pregnant?"

"The people she knew in Augusta can only confirm that she made the claim and that it was based on a home pregnancy test," Mr. Poller told him.

"Do they know if she intended to keep the baby?"

"She said she was going to go up north where she had family. One of her friends told Tony that she said, 'If I can get cleaned up, I'll have it. If I can't, I'll get rid of it. I don't want to have a messed up kid.'"

"And this family she mentioned?"

Mr. Poller shook his head.

"Her phone records..."

"That's the first thing the investigators checked. Tara's phone was on Tony's plan while they were together. Those phone records didn't lead anywhere. The raw data is on the micro SD card that's attached to the file if you want to go over it. Everything else is in there too."

Phillip thanked Mr. Poller and told him he would keep in touch. He left his office in a daze. When he stepped out, sunlight hurt his eyes. He closed his eyes and stood on the sidewalk. Did he dare to hope and get his heart broken

all over again?

Chapter 2

In the early dawn hours, Leon's friend, Pavel, had texted him to say goodnight. It was his way of letting Leon know he got home safely from clubbing all night. When Leon answered his good night with good morning, Pavel texted back that having a job sucked.

Leon didn't agree. He and Pavel were about the same age, but while Pavel was in college, Leon started working full time right after high school. Still, he didn't expect he would be wearing a suit and going to work at a stodgy office at the age of twenty.

He was an assistant at a consulting firm and proud to have such a serious job. Since arriving in Easton, homeless and with no job prospects, Leon had come a long way. Now he could afford his own place and this clunky, bright red little Ford Focus that was a million years old and sounded like an old man with bronchitis was trapped under the hood in place of an engine.

As he drove to work with the windows down, Leon enjoyed the fresh, fragrant air of late spring. The constant gray skies of winter were just a distant memory. All around were signs of nature coming fully to life. These days, Leon couldn't go anywhere without hearing birds singing. Sometimes he saw so many flowers in bloom that it seemed impossible that this was the same city of a few months ago. The air itself seemed brighter and more alive.

It was only Leon's second day at his new job as an assistant to Phillip Morton. As soon as he went in, he found out that his boss would be gone all day on personal business. Settling in behind his imposing desk, Leon looked around the office and wondered how he had found himself in such a traditional, stuffy place.

Morton Consulting was located in an old building and furnished to fit the age of that building. Dark wood shelves lined the walls. The desks were hulking and solid. The paintings on the walls were old-timey landscapes. Leon felt like he had stepped into an office from an old movie.

His own desk sat in a waiting area outside the door to Mr. Morton's inner office. While he wondered if his new boss would be coming in at all, he noticed the contrast of the antique brass lamp on one corner of the desk while the skinny monitor for his computer sat on the other side. That was this place in a nutshell.

When Leon first walked into Mr. Morton's office, he expected his boss to match the look of the place and be at least in his mid fifties. He was surprised to find that Mr. Morton was fit, broad-shouldered, sandy-haired and in his late twenties. That made him only five or six years older than Leon.

Mr. Morton wore a perfectly tailored gray suit, which was just as conservative as the office. The color of his suit made Leon take another look at Mr. Morton's eyes. Yes, they were gray and, for some reason, looked very sad. Instead of giving him the standard, firm handshake, Leon had the urge to

take the man into his arms and hold him tight until that sad look went away. To keep that impulse in check, he forced himself to look away from those melancholy eyes and focus on the suit. That suit said this man was all business.

Starting with that first meeting, Leon had to suppress every natural reaction he had to the man inside the suit. He kept reminding himself that this was work, not play, and Mr. Morton's somber attitude took care of the rest. Faced with someone who never smiled or said one casual or friendly thing, Leon found it wasn't that difficult to keep himself in line around his new boss.

That morning, Leon had been ready for another dreary day of suppressing his urges in the presence of his strict boss only to go into work and find that he had the office to himself. It was like that for most of the day. Leon spent the hours familiarizing himself with his new computer's quirks and the company phone he had been issued.

Poking around, he got some pointers from the other assistants down the hall. He also got updated on some office gossip, including the information that his boss was gay. He mulled that over until he was assigned to help out Mrs. Lahari whose own assistant had called in sick.

Mrs. Lahari was a junior executive, who had to handle two of Mr. Morton's appointments in his absence.

"Sorry it's taking me so long. You've been really patient," Leon told her over the phone as he scrambled to find some additional information she needed for her second meeting.

"That's the Morton effect," Mrs. Lahari told him.

"The what?" Leon asked as he scanned through files looking for the right one.

She explained, "Mr. Morton believes that the lowest paid employees have to be treated with the most courtesy. This is nothing. You should see how nice I am to the people who clean the office."

"That's weird. My boss didn't strike me as the warm and fuzzy type," Leon said as he emailed the files to her. He was thinking that Mr. Morton seemed kind of cold and forbidding, especially for someone who was so young and good-looking that he took Leon's breath away when he first met him.

"Warm and fuzzy? No, I don't believe anyone would ever call him that. OK. I got the files. Thank you. Good work," she said and hung up.

Leon sat back and huffed, relieved that he got the job done. Things were quiet for a while until Leon got a text. It was almost the end of his workday and Mr. Morton was telling him that he was on his way to the office. Leon set up and put on his suit jacket. He wanted to look professional and alert when his boss walked in.

Watching Mr. Morton come in an hour before quitting time, Leon could tell that whatever he had to deal with must have been something heavy. Pale and

drawn, he stopped in the doorway and stared at Leon for a moment.

"I forgot you had curly hair," Mr. Morton said.

Caught off guard, Leon didn't know what to say to that.

"Sorry. My brother..." Mr. Morton started to say but he only blinked a few times and breathed raggedly.

"Is there anything I can do?" Leon asked and got up from behind his desk. He wondered if something had happened to Mr. Morton's brother for him to look like that when he mentioned him.

"I..." Mr. Morton shook his head in confusion. Then he seemed to focus by sheer force of will. "Yes. There are a few things you can do," he said decisively.

Mr. Morton gave him a whole list of calls to make. Some of them had to do with business but two were calls to private investigators and another was to his lawyer. Then Leon called a third private investigator whose number was supplied by the lawyer's assistant. It was all very odd, but Leon wasn't about to ask any nosy questions.

After that Mr. Morton had him scan the contents of two files. When Leon went into Mr. Morton's office to return the files, he tried to keep his expression neutral. But inside the file he had noticed photos of a pretty, blond girl and a young guy with curly, light brown hair.

"Is everything OK?" Leon couldn't help but ask seeing the pained look on his boss's face.

Sitting behind his desk, clenching and unclenching his fists, Mr. Morton looked up at him. "I'm keeping you late," he said as if he only now realized that it was past Leon's quitting time. "I'm sorry. I'll be paying you personally for the overtime."

"It's fine. I didn't have plans," Leon told him.

"I appreciate your help. I've... My brother died a little while ago, but I just learned that he might have a child. I'm trying to trace the whereabouts of the child's mother," Mr. Morton said as he looked through one of the files kind of frantically. His eyes never settled on anything until he held a photo of the girl and the curly haired guy.

"That's him, I guess," Leon said. "And the kid's mom?"

"Possibly. I don't even know if the child exists. She claimed she was pregnant then disappeared."

Leon frowned. He could see how desperate Mr. Morton was to will this child into being. "I hope you find this girl and everything else you're looking for."

Once again Mr. Morton looked up at him as if he had forgotten he was there. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to burden you with personal matters. Thank you for staying late, but I think I've kept you long enough."

Leon wasn't surprised to see him turn formal like that. If he hadn't been overwhelmed by what he was dealing with, a standoffish guy like him wouldn't have said a word about any of this to Leon. He wasn't the type to

over-share at the office. In fact, this was the first time Leon was hearing about his brother's death. No one at Morton Consulting seemed to know about it or Leon would have been told before now.

"Should I order you something for dinner before I go?" Leon asked. He had a feeling his boss might be staying late, and he doubted Mr. Morton could even think of food in the state he was in.

"Dinner. Oh, no. I can't eat," Mr. Morton said, shaking his head.

"That's fine as long as you had lunch," Leon said pointedly.

Mr. Morton looked up at him guiltily.

"I can just order something simple you can eat without even taking your eyes off those files," Leon told him. "And you might need coffee too."

Instead of arguing, Mr. Morton sighed in defeat. "Thank you," he said then he frowned at Leon. "You missed dinner too. Order anything you like and put it on my credit card." He handed the card to Leon.

Leon ordered in from a nearby sandwich place – a roasted vegetable sandwich for himself and turkey for his boss plus two salads so it would seem more like a proper meal. He took in the food when it arrived. Pulling out the salad and the turkey sandwich and setting them on Mr. Morton's desk, Leon lingered. Then he sat down in the chair opposite from Mr. Morton and unwrapped his sandwich. It was a bold move, but Leon decided to risk it.

"You probably didn't mean for me to eat it here, but I have a feeling you won't eat a thing if I don't keep you company." It seemed wrong to Leon to leave him alone at a time like this and in the midst of this heavy, dark furniture with the rest of the office deserted.

"I appreciate..."

"How many times have you gone over the files?" Leon asked to cut off any arguments.

"I haven't been counting." Mr. Morton eyed the files, the look on his face both anxious and forlorn.

"Taking a break will help you take a fresh approach to things. Always helped me when I had trouble with stuff at school or figuring out my first tax return," Leon told him.

Mr. Morton took up his sandwich and leaned back.

"You and your brother must have been very different," Leon said to give Mr. Morton an opening in case he wanted to talk about him. He had noticed the difference in the pictures in the file. Mr. Morton's brother seemed carefree, unshaven, with a loose stance and a cocky grin. In one photo he had a leather jacket slung over one shoulder and an arm around a blond in tiny shorts and halter-top while they both leaned against a yellow sports car.

"True. He was the wild child." Mr. Morton smiled sadly.

Seeing him like that, Leon realized that his impression of his boss had been turned on its head. From guarded and cold to distraught, Mr. Morton had showed him a more human side. Leon only wished it wasn't over such a tragedy. But Mr. Morton was still quiet and reserved, not a sports car and

leather jacket kind of guy, and not someone who spilled his guts. Leon was surprised he could get him to reveal his heartache. While sitting with his boss like this, he felt like they were under a spell and he didn't want to do anything that might break it.

Chapter 3

Wild child, that was Tony. Looking back at him over the years, Phillip could see that little boy screaming and running around their back yard. At five, he was trying to climb the fence. Phillip pulled him down only to end up in a wrestling match with him on the grass. He loved causing trouble.

So restless and eager to explore, Tony always wanted to go where he shouldn't and climb too high. Quiet games didn't interest him. They never managed to play a single board game without it dissolving into chaos with pieces everywhere.

It wasn't fun for Tony if it wasn't crazy and loud. Scrabble was a game of how many bad words he could sneak in. Bedtime and bath time were war. Tony had to be hunted down and cornered before he would surrender.

"You were the good boy," Leon guessed.

"You could say that. That's why we clashed once Tony got older," Phillip admitted. "We lost our parents when Tony was twelve and I was sixteen."

Phillip remembered how that late evening turned into a late night with him and Tony home alone, waiting for their parents to return from a party. Then there was a knock on the door, but it wasn't their parents.

They left in their fancy clothes, trailing the scent of Mom's perfume and never came back. As he had listened to the news of the car crash that killed them, Phillip touched his cheek. His mom had kissed him at the door before she left. Maybe his cheek still had a trace of her lipstick.

To bring himself out of the abyss of that dark moment, Phillip continued speaking. "Moe and Franny Massimo, friends of our parents' became our foster parents. They were an older couple with no children. Moe and Franny were the ones who came to tell us our parents had died. They had been at the same party. They were still wearing their party clothes as they delivered the news with pained faces. Tony told them straight out that they were lying. He refused to accept that our parents could be gone just like that. After that it was as if Tony never forgave them for being the bearers of bad news. Franny and Moe were such good friends to our parents. I can only imagine how hard it was for them to tell us."

"Not as hard as it was for you to hear it," Leon pointed out.

"But when you are looking at a face of a child..." At the mention of a child, Phillip trailed off. He picked up the thread of what he was saying like he was grabbing for a lifeline. "They were really good to us, but Tony was pretty difficult. No matter what they did, he accused Franny and Moe of trying to take the place of our mom and dad. Whether they were kind to him or strict, it was the same story. While they tried to reach him, he was always pushing them away. I think he was afraid of losing the connection to our parents."

Tony treasured every scrap of their former lives. He was devastated when their house was sold. "Why don't they just tear it down?" Tony had asked angrily. "Why does everyone want to erase them?" He couldn't be reasoned

with. He only became more difficult as he got older.

"When he started high school, Tony expected more independence, a lot more. He wanted to stay out all night with his friends. When Moe and Franny put their foot down about that, he rebelled. Not only did he stay out all night, he didn't come home for days. That went from being a way to assert his independence and turned into a habit. He always came back home eventually in those days. By then, I was away at college and he often stopped by to see me."

At unpredictable and inconvenient times, Phillip had found Tony waiting in front of his dorm or wherever he was working after classes. They would grab something to eat and walk around. Tony would talk his ear off about everything he had been up to and how old and unreasonable Franny and Moe were.

If a cool car drove by, Tony would stop in mid sentence and mid step and stare, entranced. Any parked sports car would get a close inspection. He had a way of looking at a car both reverently, like a man in love, and critically, like a serious aficionado. He'd show off his knowledge and rattle off some facts for Phillip's benefit.

"I wanted to be his safe haven. I wanted him to know that he could come to me no matter what," Phillip said. He just wished it had been enough to anchor Tony and keep him from doing anything too crazy.

"Sounds like you were close," Leon said.

"In some ways. But that didn't mean that Tony listened to me. I would tell him to be more considerate to Franny and Moe, and he would tell me, 'I can't sit at home every night. I have to do my own thing.' It was all harmless fun until one night he stole a car and went joyriding. It was sheer luck that he escaped serious charges. But what about next time? I could see him spending his future in prison if he didn't end up dead. He didn't know how to slow down. It's like he was never afraid, so I was afraid for him, terrified really." Phillip remembered how fear had gripped him. He couldn't lose him too. "After the joyriding incident, I reacted rather strongly, told him he was ungrateful to Moe and Franny. I asked him, 'Do you think Mom and Dad would be proud of you for acting like this?' I just wanted to get through to him, to protect him from himself. He wanted his independence so badly, but I told him he couldn't be trusted and I was transferring schools to come home to watch over him. 'Don't bother because I won't be there,' Tony said then he stormed away."

They were both angry. Phillip hoped he hadn't meant what he said. "Whenever he stayed out after a fight with our foster parents, I always worried that he might run away for good. Every time he talked about going off somewhere for a taste of freedom, I was able to pull him back. That's why I tried not to fight with him so I could keep him grounded when he wanted to fly away. The next day after our fight, I got a call. 'I'm on a bus and I'm not

telling you where it's going. I'll call you when I get somewhere good.'" Phillip stared off into the distance as he repeated his brother's words. He looked out his office window as if Tony might still be out there somewhere, always running farther away. Stars and city lights winked in the distance as the world sank into an even deeper blackness.

"You must have looked for him," Leon said and brought him back to the present.

Phillip turned to face him but kept his head down like there was a weight on his neck. "I did but I couldn't find him." Even when Phillip had a good job and the money to hire private investigators, it got him nowhere. Tony was difficult to track down, moving all the time. Only a few sporadic phone calls, sometimes months apart, kept Phillip from thinking the worst.

Their separation had been painful to bear even when Tony was alive, not getting to talk to him for months. "He did call me from time to time, usually around Christmas. Each time I let myself hope that he might be ready to return. Tony always hung up before I could talk him into coming back. Tracing the calls didn't do any good. Tony was always long gone."

"It sounds like you tried your best to be there for him," Leon pointed out.

"But maybe if I had taken a different approach, he might have come back, or maybe he wouldn't have left. If I had been more understanding." Phillip shook his head before the "what ifs" could take hold of his imagination and break his heart all over again.

"He lived his life the way he wanted to, didn't he?" Though he didn't know him, Leon was right about that.

"He did. It was always his dream to go out there in the world, somewhere where there was no one telling him what to do." Tony's eyes would shine when he talked about it. "I would just go and never stop. See every place you can drive to." He dreamed of the freedom to go anywhere he wanted, do anything he wanted. Most of the time that meant driving too fast and taking too many chances. "He was living dangerously and it caught up with him. I was called to identify the body." Phillip stopped, clenched his jaw. He fought against the memories and just kept talking, but not about that terrible phone call or what he saw at the morgue. "And I saw his wrecked car. According to the police, Tony had won the pink slip in an illegal race. A beautiful machine once. Bright red. It was a mass of twisted metal, a killing machine. It killed my brother, flipped and mangled him." Phillip shut his eyes tight against the painful images of his little brother dead and alive. His fists closed around the pages of the file still spread out on his desk.

"I'm so sorry," Leon said in a kind, hushed voice that barely seemed to disturb the silence of the deserted office. He cautiously placed his hands over Phillip's and gently pried them open so he wouldn't crush the papers.

Phillip opened his eyes. As he looked into Leon's sad, hazel eyes, he felt so confused for a moment. Was he looking at the past or the future? He was seeing his own pain reflected but there was something more. He wasn't sure

what he saw there besides endless compassion before Leon let go of his hands and Phillip's vision cleared. Taking a deep breath, Phillip felt as if merely taking in a lungful of air hurt. It seemed impossible to just keep living.

No. Even if he didn't know how, he would keep going and find out if Tony's child existed. But right now, he had to get a hold of himself and stop taking advantage of his employee's kindness.

"Thank you for staying and listening to me, but you should really go home now," Phillip put just enough firmness into his voice so that Leon would know he should listen.

Leon got up. He made sure that Phillip didn't need anything more from him then he left. Once he was gone, the office seemed more forbidding and empty than before. It echoed with voices from a long time ago. Surrounded by so much gloom, Phillip almost regretted sending Leon away, but he really shouldn't have kept him so late in the first place.

He wished that he had realized sooner that it was past Leon's quitting time. It was a miracle he realized it at all. Phillip was so immersed in following the trails of Tony's search for his child. He might have gone on like that all night if Leon hadn't pushed him into having dinner. Asserting himself like that, his new assistant surprised him. He had seemed so listless his first day on the job.

It had certainly been a strange day. Phillip hadn't planned to have his unenthusiastic, new assistant handle any of the matters relating to Tony's possible child. But when he arrived at his office, Phillip felt like he might collapse under the strain of grief and that tiny hope that Tony's child was alive out there somewhere.

With Leon right there and ready to help, Phillip gave up some of his natural reserve. He just needed to lean on someone a little bit until he regained his equilibrium and could stand on his own two feet.

He never thought he would tell him about Tony either. Something about Leon made the words spill out. Tony came alive again, talked a mile a minute, got fired up over every new thing. Phillip's eyes fell on the name in the file – Tony Mortoni – and he remembered Tony's face when he saw the family tree their grandfather had drawn up decades before.

It was a thick, rolled up paper yellowed with age. The lines of ancestry had been made very straight and at the top, instead of Morton, it read Mortoni. When Tony saw that, he was ecstatic.

"Hey! Check it out. Our last name used to be Mortoni then some idiot in the early 1900s changed it to Morton," Tony said. "Oh, man, Franny and Moe will get a kick out of this too."

"I was going to show it to them next," Phillip told him. He was the one who had found the family tree.

"Ha! My name is Tony Mortoni. Tony More Tony." He laughed. "Come on. It's priceless. I'm changing it back. You should too. Phillip Mortoni. That sounds way cooler. Do it, man. We'll be the Mortoni brothers. It will be

awesome. Do it with me. Come on."

It still made Phillip smile to think of that. It reminded him of all the times Tony tried to draw him into some scheme. Tony was always looking for an accomplice, but in Phillip, he only found an overprotective, older brother.

Tony would get so excited, talk fast, grab Phillip by the shoulders. It was like he could move mountains just by the force of his will. But his enthusiasm never lasted. He always moved on to something else – another project, another girl, another car.

After years of it, Phillip knew not to take him too seriously. He expected Tony would grow out of it, stop doing crazy things and settle down. Maybe he would have one day. He might have been a dad to that kid and maybe many more. Now only one little life might exist, all that remained of Tony, and that's why Phillip had to find Tara West and her child.

If only he had known sooner, he could have helped Tony find them. But Tony didn't come to him. The gulf between them always seemed to be widening. Phillip's stuffy existence was as alien to Tony as Tony's rootless life of thrills was to him. No matter how far apart they might be in outlook or physical distance, they were still brothers.

Phillip looked over at the mostly uneaten sandwich that Leon had gotten for him. Tony never left food on his plate or anyone else's plate either.

"You gonna finish that?" he would ask if Phillip so much as paused between bites.

He could hear him say those words then start stuffing his face with whatever was on Phillip's plate. He was so real and alive but only in Phillip's memories. Tony would never again pick food off his plate but refuse to get a second helping.

"Nah. I'm good," Tony would claim, talking with his mouth full.

Phillip couldn't come to terms with the finality of losing him. For years he held out hope that Tony might one day show up on his doorstep, maybe ask to sleep on his couch. He didn't know how to stop expecting him. He didn't know how to stop hoping that every unknown number on his phone might be Tony calling from God knows where.

All Phillip could do was bury himself in this search that Tony had sent him on. He took up the files from Mr. Poller, and he pored over every useless detail.

Phillip didn't think he could sleep at all, but he fell asleep at his desk. He opened his eyes as pale sunlight filled his office. Everything looked gray. For a moment he was disoriented.

Where was the green grass and the back yard fence that leaned over and fell when Tony tried to climb it? Phillip blinked away bright colored dreams of Tony as a child, and stood up from his desk on unsteady feet.

In the early dawn hours, Phillip headed home to shower and change. It was close to the start of the work day. People would be coming into the office

soon, and Phillip didn't want his new assistant to find him still at his desk and start worrying about him again.

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From sitting across from Mr. Morton then driving down nighttime streets, Leon had gone to his small, one bedroom apartment. All that time his head was filled with Mr. Morton's voice and the secondhand vision of what he had and what he lost. Leon had been lost in his eyes, yearning to reach across that desk to comfort him.

That's why he spent all night dreaming about him. Now it was morning and time for a cup of coffee and a reality check. Standing in his living room full of thrift store furniture, a makeshift bookshelf and a sagging couch, Leon tried, but he couldn't really imagine what it would be like to be with a man like Mr. Morton. He closed his eyes and put himself in Mr. Morton's arms, strong as steel, wrapped around him tightly while Leon looked into those kind, sad eyes.

Damn, but his boss's pain got to him. Leon wanted to shout to him, "I'm here." But what could he really do – not give him back his brother, not erase whatever he blamed himself for. Maybe he could offer him some kind of sexual distraction. Sure he could if he didn't have a meltdown as soon as a guy touched him.

Just as well that a relationship between them was out of bounds since Leon's sexual history was so scant. Failed dates, close encounters that went nowhere – Phillip Morton might turn into another one of those. And then Leon would be mortified and want to quit a job he barely started.

As things stood, his childhood had poisoned every chance he had of making a real physical connection with another man. Guys who were rough and too grabby got nothing. Even the guys who took it slow and easy were rewarded only with a halfhearted handjob. So far, Leon had managed a few blowjobs, but he couldn't throw himself into the experience with abandon the way he wanted to.

Then Phillip Morton came along, and Leon wanted to forget all about his own past and soothe his boss's pain. He made Leon wish so hard that he was normal and not just walking scar tissue. Being only twenty, Leon figured he had time to learn to enjoy sex. Now he felt rushed, like there was no time to waste.

His friends Lenny and Mike were pushing forty, and they had wisely told him, "Take it slow and don't sabotage yourself with more bad experiences."

They were right. Plus Leon wasn't really into just hooking up. Getting to know a guy first didn't work for him either. It hardly seemed right to drag a guy on a whole bunch of dates only to freeze up when it was time to deliver the goods.

That's why he was still like this. Since he turned eighteen, moved to Easton

and started trying to get his sex life in gear, he had made very little progress and now that worried him. What if he somehow broke the barrier that now stood between him and Mr. Morton? Where would that leave him? Mr. Morton might pin him against a wall. Leon would feel his muscular body, his hard cock, start shaking and end up cowering in the corner. It was better never to get things started if that's how they were going to end – in humiliation and failure.

Chapter 4

Phillip arrived back at his office to find that Leon was already there. Unlike him, Leon looked bright eyed and blindingly handsome. Phillip hardly felt equipped to face him and pretend he was indifferent to his good looks. After thanking him for staying late and only a few quick words about business, Phillip retreated to his office.

He sighed as he saw his uncharacteristically messy desk. It wasn't like him to leave it looking like that, but he was only gone from the office long enough to get ready for work and head right back. He hardly felt refreshed or ready to handle any business.

Falling asleep at the office was the most sleep Phillip had gotten these last few days. It wasn't unusual for Phillip to stay late at the office and even spend all night there. No matter how tired he was, he had never slept slumped over his desk before.

Usually when he immersed himself in work, he was in his element and he felt like he could keep going forever. Acquiring Summit Consulting was an achievement he thought was years away, but the money he inherited from his parents put it within his reach. As far as he was concerned, he was living his dream.

When Phillip first joined the company, they had been efficiency consultants in name only. In reality their evaluations were designed to tell a company how many people they should fire and where to send their jobs overseas to maximize profits. Once Phillip got enough capital together and bought the company, he changed that as well as the name.

Now that the company bore his family name, they did real efficiency consulting. Though they sometimes had to advise their clients to cut their workforce, they also maximized profits by maximizing productivity through reduced waste of every resource like time, energy, materials as well as human resources like ability and training. They often made it possible for companies to stay in business and keep their employees working.

Now Phillip could be proud of the work they did, but these days work gave him little satisfaction. There was only one thing on his mind and he couldn't rest or focus on anything else until he found Tony's child.

It was past noon and Phillip was waiting for a new private investigator to update him on the search. Meanwhile he tried to do his job, but he just couldn't keep his hands off that file that held no clues. As he set it aside and forced himself to attend to a potential new client, Phillip heard Leon addressing someone in the outer office. His clipped tone made Phillip raise his head. The sight of a familiar face out there told him that he was about to take a break for lunch.

Ken arrived in his office unannounced, carrying a takeout bag, and his usual, insufferable attitude. Thin, blond, and impeccably dressed, he walked right past Leon at his desk.

When Leon tried to stop him, Ken didn't even pause. "I can see him in there and I'm here to feed him. You just sit there and look pretty."

Leon leaned over to give Phillip a questioning look. He nodded that it was OK for Ken to barge in.

"Hello, Ken. I guess it's lunchtime," Phillip said in greeting.

Ken was a good friend. They went from briefly being boyfriends to being exes to being best friends.

As Ken breezed in, he shut the door and marched up to Phillip's desk. "Since when don't you answer your phone at least to say you're busy?" he asked and glared at Phillip with his piercing blue eyes.

"I'm sorry, but I am busy."

"Don't tell me you're still trying to bury your grief in work," Ken scolded him, his pale eyebrows furrowing. He wasn't exactly tactful.

"That and a few other things," Phillip told him, not sure how to broach the subject of Tony's child.

"I see that you got yourself a cute assistant? That's so very unlike you. So what else aren't you telling me?"

Now that he had asked, Phillip had to tell him about Tony's possible child. The search for that child consumed him, but it wasn't easy to talk about, especially to a born skeptic like Ken. He managed to tell him about it though. Cue Ken, the perpetual naysayer.

"I understand why you're so determined to find this kid. Just remember you might be searching for a kid that doesn't exist. If this girl was even pregnant, she might have aborted or miscarried. Or she might have simply lied to make your brother chase after her."

"Your faith in human nature always lifts my spirits," Phillip said though he had wondered about some of the same things. He was driven by pure, blind hope but he held on to it for all he was worth.

"Sorry. I know this isn't what you want to hear." Ken did sound genuinely sorry as he tried to dash Phillip's hopes.

"I want to find this kid. I want him or her to be real," he stated simply. He wanted Ken to understand why he couldn't be more coolheaded and realistic about this.

"I want that for you too. You know I do. So what do you have so far?" Ken asked and set up the food he brought on Phillip's desk.

As Ken pulled a chair closer so he could eat, Phillip was reminded of Leon sitting across from him and listening to him when he most needed it. Remembering Leon's hazel eyes, Phillip had to take a moment to force himself to refocus on Ken – the man who was sitting across from him at the moment and waiting for Phillip to tell him what little he had to go on in his search.

"I contacted both of the private investigators Tony had hired. I have their reports, but I wanted to hear from them directly. Tony didn't have much money so they weren't very motivated."

"And your guy, I bet he's highly motivated," Ken said.

"She is. Asif recommended her. June Ackerman, she handled some challenging cases for his law firm. The private investigator who helped me look for Tony retired recently."

"Of course he did. He's probably living in Tahiti on all the money you paid him," Ken said. He always thought that Phillip searched for Tony too obsessively.

"When I spoke to Ackerman, she told me she's only taking this case for the sake of the child. She doesn't usually chase down missing exes," Phillip told him.

"She sounds sweet," Ken said as he speared his pasta a la vodka and bits of prosciutto with his fork.

"She sounds exactly the way I'd want an investigator to sound – tough and determined."

"Has she gotten anywhere?" Ken said. From his challenging tone, Phillip could tell how skeptical he was of the whole thing.

"She barely had time to get started, but Tara West's phone was on Tony's account during the time they were together so getting the phone records wasn't a problem. They are part of the file the lawyer gave me. There was only a few months worth of calls, but there was one phone call that stood out. It only lasted a few seconds as if she hung up just as it connected. The other investigator dismissed it as a misdial since there was another number dialed soon after. They never followed up."

"Phillip, that doesn't sound very promising," Ken said, worried that Phillip was hanging his hopes on so little.

"We'll see. Ackerman is going to update me later today."

Ken made an unhappy noise then took a big bite of his pasta.

"I wish Tony would have come to me. I could have helped him find her. He searched for three years without a word to me." Phillip shook his head. He had always been so harsh with Tony when he asked him for money, telling him he had to pay his own way. "If you want it that bad, earn the money yourself," he would tell him. Phillip wanted him to be responsible and self-reliant, but this was different. This was about family. Didn't Tony know that? Maybe he didn't. Phillip's stubbornness had cost him his brother and now might cost him a niece or nephew too.

Noticing his dour mood, Ken leaned over his desk. "Look at you. You're in bad shape already, and you're setting yourself up for disappointment. Please be realistic about this," Ken begged him while he frowned at him sternly. "You let the search for Tony take over your life. Don't let that happen again, please. I know you blame yourself for your brother leaving, but even if there was a baby, a kid can't bring Tony back to life."

"I know that. I'm not trying to resurrect Tony. I'm fulfilling his last request," Phillip stated as calmly as he could.

Ken obviously didn't believe him. "I think Tony has found yet another way to break your heart."

"Ken, don't," Phillip said. It was all stuff he had heard before. Ken blamed Tony for everything he didn't like about Phillip.

Predictably, Ken opened his mouth to barrage him with more negativity.

"Thank you for your advice," Phillip said, cutting him off. Then he added more mildly, "And thank you for listening to me and looking out for me. And for feeding me." He knew Ken meant well.

"Does a humanitarian medal of the year come with this thank you speech?" Ken said archly.

"I just want you to know I appreciate you."

"But you don't listen to me," Ken complained then he gave Phillip a break and talked about himself for the rest of his visit.

A little while later, Ken left but only after lecturing Phillip about finishing his lunch. Oscillating between hope and grief, he had barely touched the food Ken got him.

What Ken said weighed on him. Leon had been much easier to talk to, less judgmental certainly. Catching himself comparing Leon and Ken. Phillip grumbled inwardly. Leon was his employee. Ken was his ex. There was no reason to compare them.

Phillip was already full of misgivings, and his talk with Ken only intensified them. But Ken was right. He was trusting the word of a woman he didn't know, a drug user with a fake name. Phillip questioned whether there really was a child. He might be pinning his hopes on a lie. As his doubts threatened to crush him, he put in a call to Ackerman.

"Sorry. I know you said you would call me," Phillip said as soon as she picked up.

"That's because I wanted to have something more substantial to report."

"Please tell me whatever you have so far."

"I looked into that phone number, the possible misdial. It's a landline in Danning."

"Danning? That's so close," Phillip said, his heart beating fast at the thought that his niece or nephew might be there. It was only a few hours drive.

"The phone number is registered to an elderly woman, Lillian Margery Lasic. I have her address but I don't know much more than that. There was no answer when I called the number. I'll keep trying. I'm also looking into some background information on Lillian Lasic. Tomorrow I'll be going to Danning to track her down in person and hopefully interview her."

Tomorrow was too far away. Phillip had to know as soon as possible. "I don't want to wait. I can go there today. I'll leave right now."

"I don't recommend that," Ackerman said in a sharp voice.

"I understand, but I can't wait until tomorrow when I can be in Danning in two hours."

After getting the address from Ackerman, Phillip called Leon into his office.

"Is it really OK that blond guy barging in here like that?" Leon asked.

"His name is Ken. He's a good friend," Phillip said then he noticed that Leon looked displeased.

"I'm sorry if his behavior bothered you. He can be a little abrasive. I'll ask him to apologize if you like," Phillip offered.

"No, it's fine. He was very blond," Leon said sounding almost jealous.

For some reason that pleased Phillip, but then he got serious and told Leon, "Clear my schedule for the rest of the day. Cancel everything."

"Even your meeting with..."

"Everything."

"Delegate, reassign, reschedule, you mean," Leon said. At the moment he cared more about business than his boss.

Phillip realized he was right. He had a meeting with an important client that couldn't be cancelled at the last minute. "Of course. Yes. Do the best you can with my schedule, use your judgment, please." Right now it was better than his own.

Leon went back to his desk to make the changes to his schedule. In the meantime, Phillip was getting driving directions to the address in Danning. He stared at the map on his phone and tried his best to focus, but all he could think about was who might be waiting at that address. At the very least this Lillian Lasic might give him a lead to finding Tony's child.

Coming back into his office, Leon informed him he had rescheduled his appointments and reassigned the one that had to be handled today. Then he asked, "Did I hear you mention Danning?"

"Yes. Do you know it?"

"Know it. Hate it. Lived there most of my life."

"Oh. Hate it?" Phillip asked worriedly.

"It's poor. It's ugly, and I don't mean just the way it looks."

Phillip frowned. He didn't like the sound of it. Danning was one of a cluster of small communities along Tekeniohneka River. The communities grew around a handful of factories that closed down in the last few decades. It was an impoverished area now. Phillip couldn't help but worry about what kind of life Tony's child might have in a place like that, and Leon's attitude certainly didn't comfort him.

He made a decision. "Since you know the place, I'd like you to come with me."

"What will I be doing?"

Phillip wasn't exactly sure, but he felt better having him along. "Helping me navigate," he said vaguely.

Leon shrugged. "My time is your time."

When Phillip was ready to go, Leon grabbed his suit jacket and followed him out. As they walked to his car, Phillip thought that maybe Leon could keep him grounded. Right now his hopes were soaring along with his anxieties. He was too wound up to think straight. All he could think about was Tony's child out there somewhere or maybe only a few hours away.

Chapter 5

Leon got into Mr. Morton's car and inhaled the scent of leather or was it money? This car was nothing like Leon's cheapo ride. It was the kind of car that purrs and hums, and when you really go for it, it roars. The BMW wasn't flashy but it had some muscle under the hood. Sitting in it was pure comfort, but Leon couldn't exactly enjoy the ride knowing that their destination was bound to shake loose a shitload of unpleasant memories.

He set out on this road trip to his home town without knowing much about what was taking them there. During the car ride, Mr. Morton filled him in. He spoke haltingly, like he was afraid to say too much and dash his own hopes. Once again, Leon was seeing him in a different light. Strong emotions threatened to break through his composure as he drove and asked questions about the place where Leon grew up.

Leon didn't like talking about his childhood, but he sketched in his own view of the place. Mr. Morton would be seeing it for himself soon enough. Just as they passed the sign that said Welcome to Danning, Mr. Morton told Leon, "You should really call me Phillip. At this stage, I think we're past formalities."

Leon nodded and smiled vaguely, but he was distracted by the well-known landmarks of his childhood.

Danning was a grubby little town of nondescript storefronts and shabby apartment buildings, none of them more than half a dozen stories high. There was nothing much to look at, but to Leon it was plenty, too much even.

He found being there oppressive, like the very air was stagnant and choking him. Familiar sights brought echoes of the past. When they turned at the next intersection, they would pass by an empty lot. It had been sitting empty since Leon was a child.

One day when he was skipping school to avoid the bullies, Leon had discovered the gap in the row of houses. He had stared at it in confusion. Was he on the wrong street? It took him a while to realize that the house had been torn down.

The ground had been freshly bulldozed, but this was the place where they once lived with the worst of his mother's boyfriends. Seeing the empty lot, Leon at age thirteen, stared at the imprint of the house in the dirt. It was an ugly scar, but then he raised his eyes from the ground and took in the clear view of the river and the sky, and he cheered up. If only all the houses and apartments where he and his mother lived could meet the same fate.

He wished for that so hard, but now he knew that they would still live on in his memories like that old house did even now. It seemed to rise out of the ground, rebuild itself in front of his eyes. Its creaking screen door opened to invite him in to relive some of the darkest moments of his childhood.

To shake off the feeling of the past encroaching on him, he focused on Mr. Morton's, Phillip's, quest and found himself desperately hoping that they

would find his brother's kid. Clinging to that hope, he looked over and understood the white knuckled way that Phillip clutched the steering wheel as he drove down unfamiliar streets, each more depressing than the last.

With Leon navigating they finally arrived at the address Phillip was looking for. They found themselves parked in front of a ramshackle, three story apartment building. It wasn't all that different from many of the places where Leon had lived throughout his childhood. The building showed all the signs of being low rent and poorly maintained.

As they got out of the car, Leon looked around. The neighborhood was a mix of tiny, single family homes and a few of these small, old apartment buildings. He could see garbage collecting against the sides of the buildings and under the stairs. A rusting dishwasher was abandoned on the curb. Further down the street, a trashcan was overturned and spilling into the gutter.

Approaching the building where 2582 Apt #4 was located, they saw a blond woman in her twenties bouncing a baby. Leon wondered if she could be Tara West until she turned around and he saw that she didn't look like the photos from the file. Turning to Phillip, he wondered if he might have been thinking the same thing. Phillip wasn't looking at her though. Something else had captured his attention.

That's when Leon noticed a little boy sitting on the front steps of the apartment building. His breath caught in his throat. The little boy was about three with curly, dark blond hair and light eyes. Leon looked back at Phillip. His eyes were wide and he didn't seem to be breathing at all.

"Sir?"

"He could be Tony at that age, if his eyes and hair were a little darker and if he was grinning like a little devil." Blinking back tears, Phillip forced himself to look away from the little boy.

Even from this distance, Leon could see a resemblance to the pictures of Phillip's brother. Unlike Tony, the little boy wasn't smiling. He looked anxious as he sat there all alone with a small backpack next to him.

Wondering what his next step would be, Leon watched Phillip. Swallowing hard and trying to get his emotions under control, Phillip approached the woman with the baby. Leon hung back a little, not wanting her to feel crowded.

Phillip stopped a few steps from the woman. "Excuse me, do you know Lillian Lasic? I believe she lives in this building."

"Why do you want to know?" the blond woman asked suspiciously.

"I'm looking for this woman." Phillip showed her a photo. "She goes by the name Tara West."

The woman shook her head before he finished saying the name. "Don't know about that. But you won't find her here. You a cop or something?"

"No. I just need to speak to her about a family matter," Phillip said, and Leon could tell that he had lost some hope.

"You from social services?" she said and she frowned even deeper. She looked him up and down and glanced over at Leon too.

"No. It's a personal matter about a member of my family," Phillip told her.

"As far as family goes, the only ones you'll find here are her great aunt and Joan's little boy," the woman said.

"Joan?"

She bounced her baby and pointed a finger at the photo of Tara West. "That's Joan."

Phillip took a deep breath then gestured toward the stairs where the little boy was sitting. "That little boy...?"

"He's Joan's son. But Joan's dead," the woman said.

Philip looked back at her, stunned. "Dead?"

"Yeah." The woman looked down at her baby then she looked away. "She died less than a year ago now. Cops came to tell Lilly about it. That's her great-aunt. Lilly's had a hell of a time of it since then and before Joan died too." The woman looked toward the little boy.

Phillip followed her gaze then asked. "Is this great-aunt, Lilly, is she around?"

"No. That's why I'm out here. I'm watching the boy until she comes back. She was feeling pretty bad. Scared me a little how bad she looked. Glad she went to the doctor."

"She isn't well?"

The woman shook her head. "At her age, it's to be expected. There's a county service that picks her up and takes her to her doctor's appointments. With all the stops they make, it takes forever."

"My name is Phillip Morton. This is my assistant, Leon Braga. Do you mind if I speak to the little boy. I think I might be his uncle," Phillip said.

Leon was surprised that he didn't wait for the great-aunt to come back so he could speak to her first. His impatience must have gotten the better of him, and Leon couldn't really blame him with his nephew only a few yards away.

"I'm Zoe. Nice to meet you," the woman said automatically while looking back and forth from Phillip to the boy. "Might be his uncle?"

"That's why I was looking for Joan. She told my brother that she was pregnant with his child then disappeared. My bother is... He died recently."

"I'm sorry for your loss." Zoe looked at him sadly. "I guess you can talk to him, poor kid," she said. "I'll be here watching."

"Of course. Thank you." Phillip went up the steps slowly while Leon stayed with Zoe.

Leon couldn't take his eyes of what was about to happen. If he was so overcome by emotion, he could only imagine how Phillip must feel. Whatever he might have been feeling, Phillip was calm and low-key as he went to sit on the steps, a few feet away from the boy. The boy looked at him curiously and Phillip smiled. Seeing the look in his eyes full of sadness and joy, Leon felt like his heart might burst.

Chapter 6

The building at number 2582 was dwarfed by a huge tree. The front of the building was in its shade, including the steps. There was no breeze. Coming down between the leaves, the sun made bright spots that seemed etched into the concrete. One of those spots was on the boy's shoulder another on his knee. They highlighted the red t-shirt and blue jeans he was wearing.

He looked so small and familiar to Phillip. He was Tony at that age and he was also what Tony lost. It was hard for Phillip not to simply burst into tears at the sight of him. But he couldn't. The little boy's eyes were on him. He had to stay calm.

As he went up the steps, Phillip was thinking that Zoe really shouldn't have let him talk to the little boy, but he was also glad that she did. He felt irresistibly pulled toward him.

He stopped a few feet from him and took a deep breath. Ignoring the dirt and dead leaves on the steps, Phillip sat down. The little boy still stared at him. Next to him was a child's backpack with duct tape along one edge.

"Hi. My name is Phillip. Is that your stuff?" Phillip asked him.

"I have a coloring book, but I finished it," the boy said.

"Do you live in this building?" he asked, not sure what he should say to keep the conversation going.

"Up there." The boy pointed straight up.

"In the tree?" Phillip asked him.

The boy giggled then shook his head. Now he pointed over toward the windows upstairs.

"Are you waiting for someone?"

"My Gran-gran."

"Her name is Lilly, right? And what's your name?"

"My name is Anthony, but everyone just calls me Ant."

Anthony. That was a surprise. After she ran from Tony, Phillip wouldn't have expected Tara to name her son after him. "What about your last name?"

"My whole name is Anthony Morton Junior."

Phillip held his breath and blinked back tears. Hearing that name, he couldn't say anything for a while, but Ant didn't notice.

He jumped up excitedly and Phillip saw that a white van slowed then stopped in front of the building. The driver got out, opened the side door and lowered some steps. Then very slowly, an old woman got out. Her hair was silvery gray and cut straight at chin level. Her eyes were a watery blue and blinking uncertainly in the sun.

Zoe called out to the old lady then spoke quietly to her while pointing at Phillip. Leon spoke to her as well. Phillip could hear him introduce himself. Blinking at Leon then at Phillip then looking back at Zoe, Lilly Lasic looked like she couldn't take it all in. Phillip sympathized. He felt the same way himself.

After parting with Zoe, she walked up the stairs, stopping every few steps to catch her breath. As Phillip stood up, Ant ran down to her. At first, Phillip only watched their happy reunion. He heard Lilly call Ant "her little man". Picking up Ant's backpack, Phillip joined them.

"My name is Phillip," he said to Lilly. Instead of introducing himself fully, he asked her, "Did Zoe tell you who I am?"

Lilly nodded slowly. She stared at him and blinked again the way she had before. Though she wore glasses, Phillip got the impression that she couldn't see very well with them. Finally she smiled at him. Phillip noticed that her face was drawn from the effort of climbing only a few steps.

"Well, it sure is nice to meet you," she paused to take a few breaths before she continued. "I'm Lilly, and I guess you've met my little man here." She looked down at Ant proudly.

"I did, and I can't tell you how happy I am about that. I would like to speak with you, maybe more privately," Phillip told her. He looked over at Ant significantly to let her know that he shouldn't hear some of the things he wanted to say.

She nodded. "Of course. Let's go up. Though it might take me a while."

"Do you mind if my assistant comes up as well?" Phillip asked. He didn't want to leave Leon to wait.

"He's a nice looking young man. Even an old lady like me can appreciate that," she said with a smile and waved Leon up to join them.

All four of them went up with Lilly moving very slowly, just as she had warned them. Ant didn't show any impatience. He seemed used to this. The pace allowed Phillip to take in the dark stairwell and the dank smell.

"Sorry to hold up you young folks like this," Lilly said, huffing.

"No problem, ma'am," Leon told her.

"Gran-gran has slow bones. She's a snail," Ant told them.

Phillip wondered what he meant until his great-great aunt explained.

"He means I have old bones. That's why I'm slow as a snail."

Ant smiled up at her. "I like snails, but when I play with them they get scared and they hide."

Listening to his sweet voice, Phillip grinned and tried to keep tears out of his eyes. This was really Tony's son. He seemed gentler than his dad. He walked patiently next to his Gran-gran while Tony would have been sprinting up and down those stairs ten times by now, yelling for everyone to hurry up already.

They ended up in a tiny apartment with that huge tree outside the window shutting out much of the light. There seemed to be only the cramped living room and one bedroom. It was gloomy and Phillip could smell mold. Overall the place wasn't very clean.

There were signs of Ant's great-great aunt making an effort though. Seeing how she moved with difficulty, Phillip could understand why the place looked like that. Her poor eyesight also made it impossible for her to keep a clean

house. It still bothered Philip that Tony's son lived in a place like this.

The kitchen and living room shared the same space with a small Formica table in the middle. A couch with misshapen cushions faced the window. It had a brick holding up one corner of it instead of a leg.

Noticing what he was looking at, Ant warned him, "No jumping."

Considering the state of that couch, even sitting on it might be dangerous. Phillip's gaze moved on to the only other room in the place. With the door open, Phillip saw into the bedroom. There was a single bed in there and a folding bed. That must have been where Ant slept.

While Phillip took in what little there was to see, Lilly sat down at the kitchen table heavily and breathed hard for a while.

"You hungry, my little man?" she asked Ant, who nodded. She started to get up with a lot of effort.

"Can I do anything?" Phillip asked.

"I was just going to give Ant some peanut butter and crackers," she said, leaning on the back of the chair for support.

"Peanut butter is all gone," Ant said.

"Oh, well. Do we have any cheese?" she asked.

Ant opened the mostly empty refrigerator and pulled out a single slice wrapped in plastic. "One cheese!" he announced.

"And where are the crackers?" Phillip asked him so Lilly could sit back down.

Ant pointed up at a cabinet. Phillip got a half empty box of crackers and also a plate. Sitting at the table across from his Gran-gran, Ant broke off a piece of cheese for each cracker until he ran out and had a few more crackers plain. Once he was done, he just sat there kicking his feet. That wasn't enough food even for a little guy like him, but Ant didn't complain.

"I'll go shopping when I've had a little rest," Lilly said, looking at Ant sadly. "Zoe sometimes buys a few things for us when she goes. She's a good girl."

"Would it be all right if I went shopping for you? I can go right now," Leon offered. Phillip was so grateful to him for being so thoughtful.

"That's such an imposition, I couldn't..." Lilly started to say, but Leon wouldn't hear it.

"Not at all. I don't mind. Donatella's Grocery is still open, isn't it?"

Lilly shook her head. "Donatella's is too pricey. Oh, no. I do my shopping at QuickSave."

"This is on Phillip's tab. He can afford Donatella's," Leon said with a wink at Phillip.

Lilly still didn't look sure, but Phillip handed Leon some cash and he was off.

Lilly sent Ant to play in the bedroom then she invited Phillip to sit at the kitchen table with her. That's when Phillip told her about Tony. With Ant just

in the next room, Phillip kept his voice low. Even so he had trouble getting the words out.

Lilly clutched at the front of her shirt and looked pained as she heard about Tony's death. "Oh, my poor Ant. Zoe told me your brother passed. I'm so sorry about your loss. To think that my Ant doesn't have a momma or a daddy now."

"I was very sorry to hear about Tara, I mean Joan." He told her how he had found out about Ant and his mother. "Tony tried to find her, but he only knew her as Tara West."

"Where did she get that from?" Lilly said while she gazed at the photos that Phillip had brought along. She obviously hadn't known her great-niece used the name. That reminded Phillip to ask about Ant's name.

"When I was speaking to Ant earlier, he told me his full name. I'm happy to hear that he has his father's name, but I'm a little surprised too since Ant's mother didn't stay in touch with Tony."

Lilly sighed. "Joan didn't know what she was going to name her baby. She was thinking up names, never settling on any one in particular. After he was born, I told that girl that she better give the child his father's name in case he ever needed something. It was a sort of insurance policy. This way the boy carries his father's name and that puts a stamp on the kid, you could say. It was so he would be taken care of if something happened to Joan or to me. With the life she lived, I was always afraid...." She stopped for a moment to regain her composure. "That one time, she did listen to me. 'I can do that,' Joan said with this crafty look on her face. Later on she told me that your brother didn't like his given name at all."

"That's true, but I'm glad Ant inherited it. Once Tony left home, he was more likely to go by Tony Mortoni than his real name, and he used other aliases as well. He and Joan had that in common," Phillip said with a smile.

Tony always complained about his full name, maybe because he heard it so often when he was in trouble. He didn't think it fit him. "It makes me sound like I work in a bank or something," he groused. But he never officially changed his name, possibly for their parents' sake. Now it would live on in his little boy.

"After Joan died, did you try contacting Tony?" Phillip asked. It was clear that Lilly could have used help raising Ant.

"I didn't know how or where to start. Zoe went on the computer to look for him, but she had no luck."

If she looked for Tony under the name Anthony Morton, she wouldn't have found him very easily. And Lilly didn't have the money to pay a private investigator the way Philip did when he found her.

"I wish Tony could have found you first," Phillip told her in a quiet voice. The thought that Ant would never meet Tony, that his brother would never set eyes on his little boy choked him up. If he was alone right now that thought

would have made Phillip collapse in tears.

Chapter 7

It didn't take long for Leon to come back from his shopping trip. He brought in two full bags of groceries and set them on the kitchen counter. Ant was very curious about what he bought. As Leon showed him, Phillip was glad to see a few different kinds of fruit.

"Bananas! I love bananas," Ant said until he saw that Leon got ice cream as well.

Lilly decided that Ant should have some real food first, and Leon volunteered to make them both sandwiches with what he bought.

As he worked in the kitchen, Leon eyed Ant. "So you're Ant. The ant and the lion. That's perfect. My name is Leon, and that means lion."

After looking confused for a minute, Ant said, "You're a lion?"

"I'm a lion in the same way you're an ant. You're an Ant but you're not an ant. But you're little like an ant."

"Nooo," Ant protested.

Leon shrugged as if to say, "I call 'em as I see 'em."

"Sorry. I didn't realize that I didn't introduce you two," Phillip said. In his state of emotional turmoil, he had forgotten to make the introductions. And he still hadn't told Ant that he was his uncle. He decided it was time to do both, with Lilly's permission. "Is it all right if I tell Ant now?" Phillip asked Lilly, and she nodded. He steeled himself then said, "As you heard, this is Leon. Leon, this is Ant, my nephew."

Ant mouthed the word nephew like he wasn't sure what it meant.

"It's something good," Leon said and smiled at the confused little kid.

Phillip explained. "You are my nephew, and I'm your uncle. My name is Phillip Morton."

"Morton like me?" Ant asked and pointed at himself.

"Yes. Exactly. You have your dad's name, but we called him Tony. Your dad was my younger brother."

"Younger? A little brother?" Ant asked in wonder.

"Yes, he was my little brother. That makes me your Uncle Phillip."

Ant looked unsure for a moment and a little overwhelmed then he said, "Hi, Uncle Phillip!"

"Hi. I'm very happy I found you," Phillip said with a voice tight with emotion and tears in his eyes. He and Ant shook hands formally, and Phillip never wanted to let go.

Lilly ate only a little bit of her sandwich though she thanked Leon profusely for making it and for doing the shopping. Leon and Ant went to sit by the open window and eat ice cream. Fresh air wafted in even if there was no breeze. After that Leon kept Ant busy with an incomplete deck of playing cards, and Phillip spoke to Lilly again.

"I'd like for you and Ant to come and live with me." He knew it was sudden, but he really didn't want to see them staying here.

Lilly stared at him in astonishment. "Oh, no. You don't want an old lady you barely know living with you." Seeing the pained look on his face, she frowned at him. "We couldn't impose like that."

"You wouldn't be imposing. We're family." As he said it, Phillip realized that it was true. He had just met them, but they were his life now. That's why he wanted to convince Lilly to accept his offer. "I have a large apartment, and I can move us all to an even bigger house." As Phillip spoke, she kept shaking her head and his heart was sinking. "If you want to stay in this area, I'll find a house near here."

"That's not it. I know you want to take care of Ant," she said sympathetically.

"I do, more than anything."

"But I can't just move in with you, even if you do seem like a very nice young man."

Phillip noticed she said I. Maybe he was grasping at straws, but he asked her. "You can't move in? What about Ant?"

She looked thoughtful. Of course she wouldn't want to give him up.

"I know it's too soon to trust me with him," Phillip said.

"It is," she confirmed. "But I have to face the hard truth. I don't know how much longer I can take care of him. You finding him, it's a blessing."

"What if you two come for a visit? Any time you want I can come and pick you up," Phillip offered.

She agreed to a visit when she felt better then she went to the bedroom to lie down and rest. Phillip went to join Leon and Ant's card game. They all sat cross-legged on the floor and Leon dealt the cards. He didn't even bother explaining the rules of the game to Phillip just handed him some cards.

"OK, your turn," Leon told him. "Show us your cards. What you got?"

As soon as Phillip showed his hand, Leon shook his head. "Those are no good. They're weak. Ant, take all his cards."

Ant looked from him to Phillip. "All of them? But then he won't have any."

"That's how this game works," Leon said mercilessly.

Ant looked at Phillip pityingly. He then leaned over toward Leon and whispered, "But he's my Uncle Phillip."

Leon smiled but then he got tough. "No special treatment."

Phillip offered his cards to Ant, and he took them reluctantly.

"Sorry," he whispered.

"Don't worry. I'll give him more," Leon told him. Then as soon as he dealt the next hand, he instructed Ant to take all his cards.

"Again?" Ant said.

The aim of the game seemed to be for Ant to end up with lots of cards though the deck was missing about half of them. But whenever Leon wasn't looking, Ant would sneak a few cards back to Phillip and smile shyly at him.

As they played, Phillip spent most of the time trying to act casual and not fall apart in front of his newfound nephew. Leon was a big help. Ant seemed completely at ease with him, probably because, unlike Phillip, he wasn't an emotional wreck.

About an hour later, Lilly got up and Phillip decided they better go.

"Can I leave some money with you for Ant?" Phillip asked Lilly. "I'll leave my card too. Call me if you need anything, please." He quickly wrote his personal cell phone number on the back of his business card.

Lilly was ready to refuse the money, but seeing the pleading look on Phillip's face she accepted.

It wasn't easy to leave Ant even as Phillip promised to see him again soon. He was so small and shy. He waved down at Phillip and Leon all the way as they walked down the stairs. It hurt Phillip's heart to lose sight of him.

When they stepped outside, the street seemed very bright after that dim stairwell. Phillip was glad to see that Zoe was once again in front of the building. Her baby was crying and she was walking her up and down the sidewalk. Phillip went up to her.

"Thank you so much for your help," he told her while her baby fussed. "This is my card. Please call me if Lilly or Ant ever need anything. You can call any time." Phillip handed her his card with his personal cell phone number scrawled on the back.

Zoe nodded. "I'm glad they have someone now. I didn't like seeing a sick, old lady and a little kid without any family to look out for them."

"I'll be stopping by again, and I'll definitely be looking out for them from now on," Phillip assured her.

When he and Leon got to his car, Phillip got behind the wheel, started the car then he just sat there without putting the car in gear. He leaned back and stared ahead of him. There wasn't much to see. Directly in front of the car, bushes were growing through a chain link fence, almost obscuring it.

"I found him. I really found Tony's son," Phillip said to himself. He took a shaky breath and let it out. He gripped the steering wheel hard, like that might keep him from falling apart. But hearing Leon's deep, mellow voice did him a lot more good.

"Yes, you did, and he's something," Leon told him.

Phillip turned to him and looked into his hazel eyes. As Leon smiled at him, Phillip grinned too. Through the tears in his eyes, he said, "He is, isn't he. He's a sweet, little guy. I just wish I could have been more at ease around him the way you were."

"It's easy for me. After losing your brother, I know you had a lot of emotions coming down on you. Considering all that, you did fine," Leon said like he understood just how much sadness and happiness Phillip had warring inside him. "And I saw Ant sneaking those cards to you. He likes you."

"You think so?" Phillip said, pleased to hear it. "I'll try to do better next time. I didn't even have a gift for him." Phillip only now realized it.

"Hey, what kind of uncle shows up empty handed?" Leon teased him then he narrowed his eyes at him. "Now you have a look on your face that says you're going to buy up a whole toy store."

"I might," Phillip admitted. He wanted to give Ant everything. That reminded him of everything Ant didn't have. "Leon, was that place as bad as I thought, or was I just being a snob and a neat-freak?"

"Both," Leon told him, giving him a wry grin. "I've lived in worse places and with worse people. But Lilly seemed really nice, and you can tell that she's doing her best. And Ant obviously loves her."

Phillip nodded. "I'll make sure they have everything they need. And if Lilly needs better medical care, she'll have that too."

Feeling a little more under control after talking to Leon, Phillip started driving them back. He was amazed that Leon could be such a comforting and steadying influence when he had known him only for such a short time. And he had won over Ant instantly. Phillip was glad he went with his impulse to invite him along.

"Thank you for coming with me. You were so much help," Phillip told him. He also planned to pay him well for his time.

"I didn't do much. I'm really glad you found your nephew and that I got to see the happy moment."

"It's not just today. You've had to juggle things at work too. I know you had to jump into it with minimal instructions from me and everything in turmoil."

Leon tried to shrug off Phillip's praise. "All I did was pass the buck and dump a whole bunch of extra work on your senior consultants."

"I'll be thanking them as well," Phillip said. He had almost forgotten about Mrs. Lahari and all the others who were picking up the slack for him. All of his attention was on Ant, but also on his new assistant. He would have to watch that.

He was too attractive and lively not to pique Phillip's interest. Leon had broad shoulders, and a strong, slim body that Phillip shouldn't have noticed or admired. But who could ignore a kissable mouth that was quick to smile, or hair that begged for Phillip's fingers to tug and tangle in it.

In his kind but humorous eyes, Phillip had glimpsed a depth of hidden sorrows. He hadn't yet asked him about that, nor should he. While sitting next to him, Phillip certainly had other matters that should occupy his mind. If only something would cut off his view of Leon's hand with beautiful, long fingers resting casually on his leg. The muscle of his thigh was clearly outlined under his trousers. As Leon leaned over to adjust the A/C on his side, Phillip breathed in his scent.

He didn't know how he drove straight after that. He wanted to drive right off the road and throw himself on Leon, inhale and devour him. However

uncomfortable and inappropriate it was to dwell on the intoxicating beauty of the man next to him, there was one thing that he couldn't dismiss. It was Leon who was there to share this incredible day with him.

Chapter 8

Tony's child was real. Phillip couldn't sleep or eat as the knowledge washed over him again and again, never quite sinking in but always making his heart hurt. He was constantly at the mercy of the ebb and flow of happy and sad feelings. After losing Tony, finding Ant seemed like a miracle.

He had already delivered the news to Franny and Moe. They were beside themselves when they heard. He also called Mr. Poller, who sounded close to tears.

Ken wasn't nearly as emotional. As usual, he had all kinds of warnings for him when he heard how Ant and his great-great aunt lived. His misgivings and well-meaning advice couldn't make a dent in Phillip's elation.

Even while at work, Phillip split his time between doing his job and trying to adjust to his new role as an uncle. At the moment, Phillip was not exactly earning his paycheck. He was browsing the real estate listings, looking for an ideal place to live. He thought he might be able to persuade Lilly to move if he showed her a beautiful house. Maybe something traditional with a lush garden might appeal to her.

Meanwhile Leon was actually doing his job. He delivered some files to him, set them down on Phillip's desk and then he lingered. Phillip turned away from his laptop to look up at him.

Leon smiled apologetically. "I don't mean to be nosy, but did you go back to see Ant and Lilly yet?"

"I probably wouldn't have been able to keep it to myself if I had," Phillip told him. "I called Lilly and spoke with Ant for a few minutes. I asked her if I could come by tomorrow. I wanted to go today or even yesterday, but I don't want to make a nuisance of myself."

"You should make a nuisance of yourself," Leon urged him. "I bet Ant would love to see you. Sorry. I don't mean to butt in, but you shouldn't be afraid to spend time with your nephew. I think he really liked the idea of having an uncle."

"He'll like it even better when I bring gifts tomorrow like a proper uncle should."

"Good thinking." Leon smiled and Phillip found himself smiling back and staring at him too long.

Leon was staring too and then they both got embarrassed and mumbled something about having work to do. At that moment, Phillip was sure that Leon was gay. Not that it mattered.

He really had to stop paying so much attention to his good-looking, new assistant. Sometimes he wondered if personnel had deliberately hired him to put temptation in his way.

Phillip had asked Ms Prescott in personnel for someone not too set in his or her ways. His last assistant had been rather inflexible. Maybe that was why

she chose Leon. He was young, only twenty, and had limited experience. On his resume, he had one other full time assisting job plus some temp work – not that Phillip had any complaints. He had been incredibly helpful, and Mrs. Lahari had only good things to say about him.

When he first started, Phillip wasn't fully aware of him or just how enticing he was. He had only just found out about Tony. His heart was weighed down with grief, his vision blurred with unshed tears and gut wrenching memories. For a while he was blind to everything that he now found irresistible about Leon.

Ever since he had taken him on his search for Ant, Phillip had become aware of an intense attraction to Leon. Now he was extra cautious around him so he wouldn't give himself away. That's why he hadn't asked for his help in picking out gifts for Ant though he desperately needed a second opinion.

Phillip had turned to the Internet and did some research instead. He looked up the most highly rated toys appropriate for a three-year-old and ordered the top three choices from a local store for immediate delivery then two more just in case. They were lined up on his office sofa at home, a sweet reminder that there was a little boy in his life now.

Setting aside his real-estate search, Phillip decided to do some actual work only to be interrupted by a call on his cell phone.

"Is this Phillip Morton?" a woman's voice asked as soon as he put the phone to his ear.

"Yes, it is," Phillip said. He didn't recognize the number, but he thought he recognized the voice. "Zoe, is that you?"

"Yes. I'm calling because of what you said. You see, Lilly is in the hospital."

Phillip closed his eyes tightly. "And Ant? Where is he?"

"He's here with me."

"All right. Which hospital? Simon General in Garston?" Phillip said remembering the name of the hospital closest to Danning.

Zoe confirmed it. "That's right. It's kind of far. I have to take three buses. I wish I could take Ant, but even if I left the baby with my cousin..."

"I'm going to stop by, pick up Ant and you as well and take you both to visit Lilly. When is a good time?" Phillip asked.

"I'm not busy now, and Ant is a little ball of nerves over it what with Lilly passing out and the ambulance coming to take her away."

Phillip assured her that he was on his way and got off the phone. Taking a deep breath, he went out to talk to Leon. Even before he told him anything, Leon knew something was wrong just by looking at him. After giving him the news, Phillip once more had to tell him to shuffle his schedule.

"Don't worry about anything here. And text me when you know more about how Lilly is doing, please," Leon said as Phillip rushed out the door.

Phillip turned back for only a second. "I will," he promised and saw Leon give him an encouraging smile.

"She'll be OK. And Ant too. They have you now," Leon told him with calm confidence.

With those words in his ears, Phillip hurried out. He was tempted to ask Leon to come with him, but he couldn't lean on him that much. It was enough to know that Leon was here if he needed him.

Phillip broke the speed limit the whole way and arrived in front of the rundown apartment building to a familiar sight. Zoe was out there on the sidewalk with her baby and Ant was sitting on the steps. Seeing how anxious he looked, Phillip went right up to him.

Ant jumped up from the step to greet him. "Hi, Uncle Phillip."

"Hi, Ant. I'm going to take you and Zoe to see your Gran-gran," Phillip told him and they walked down toward Zoe together.

"Don't you guys be too worried," Zoe said. "Lilly will be in and out of that hospital and right back home." She spoke to both him and Ant, and Phillip wondered if he was letting his worry show.

That wouldn't do. While Zoe went to drop off her baby, Phillip talked to Ant on the same front steps where he had first seen him. The big tree made bright yellow patches on the dirty, gray concrete, but this time a steady breeze made them shift.

As he tried to step on the moving patches of sunlight, Ant went over what happened to Lilly. "I couldn't wake up Gran-gran. She was cold. I runned to get Zoe. She couldn't wake her up either."

"Were you scared?" Phillip asked though he knew he must have been.

Ant nodded and bit his bottom lip.

"There's no need to be scared any more. The doctors are going to take good care of your Gran-gran."

"And you are here," Ant added and smiled tentatively.

"Yes, I am," Phillip said and managed to keep his voice steady. "You'll get to see Lilly soon when you, me and Zoe go to visit her."

Ant nodded but his expression turned serious again. Phillip hated to think of such a heavy burden on his tiny shoulders. He looked at his curly hair and thought about Tony, but he could only picture Tony smiling at that age.

The two of them had lived carefree lives before their parents died, but Ant had already lost both his parents. That's why Phillip would make sure that Lilly had excellent medical care. Ant wasn't going to experience another loss if Phillip could do anything about it.

Zoe came back from her cousin's place. Luckily, it was just down the street. They all went to Phillip's car, and Zoe whistled, impressed by his BMW. As Ant climbed into the back seat, Phillip realized he didn't have a car seat for him.

"I don't suppose Lilly has a car seat for Ant stashed away somewhere?" Phillip asked Zoe though he didn't hold out much hope.

"No car seat or a car to go with it," Zoe said.

"I guess it will be OK for today. I'll make sure to get him one," Phillip said as he watched Zoe buckle him in. He wondered what else he hadn't thought of when it came to Ant, but for now the main thing was to take him to see Lilly.

During the drive, Zoe tried to distract Ant by pointing at things out the window. He would only look for a second then stare ahead anxiously. They couldn't get to the hospital soon enough.

When they were about halfway there, Phillip called Leon and put him on speaker.

"You have my card playing buddy with you?" Leon asked.

"He means you, Ant," Phillip told him.

"I'm here and Uncle Phillip and Zoe," Ant said.

"You're not talking and driving, are you, Ant?" Leon asked him.

"Me? I'm not driving," Ant told him.

After that Leon had Ant tell him all the jokes he knew. He knew only two and neither one of them made any sense. That was OK since Leon was better at distracting Ant than the scenery.

"We're pulling into the hospital parking lot now," Phillip told Leon.

"OK, I'll let you guys go. Say hi to Lilly for me," Leon told them.

Ant scrambled out of the car in a rush, but as soon as they stepped through the front doors of the hospital, he started to look really scared. He looked around wide-eyed, and the hospital smell probably didn't help. Zoe was already holding his hand, but Phillip put out his hand too.

"Do you want to hold my hand?" he asked Ant.

Ant grabbed hold of his hand fast and clutched it tight. Phillip was lost for a moment, drowning in too many feelings to be able to sort them out. He just focused on that tiny hand in his and on reassuring the anxious little boy at his side.

Then Phillip spotted the sign for the gift shop. He drew Ant's attention to it.

"We can go in there and get a gift for your Gran-gran," Phillip told him.

Ant nodded. Going in, he pointed at the flower display. "Gran-gran likes flowers."

"We'll get her some, and you can pick them out."

Ant picked out the most colorful mix of flowers, and Zoe gave him a thumbs up. The arrangement came in a basket with a bow on the handle. Ant carried the basket of flowers clumsily but proudly as they went to the elevators and up to Lilly's room.

From the door of her room, they could see Lilly sitting up in bed. Phillip was relieved that she didn't look too bad considering. The curtain was drawn on the bed of her roommate. Quiet voices could be heard on the other side.

"Looks like you have a roommate," Zoe said as they went in.

"That's Margaret and her beau. She's in here for her hip. I got lucky not breaking anything when I landed. And how's my little man?" Lilly said and opened her arms to Ant.

Ant squealed happily, handed the basket to Phillip and ran into her arms.

"Easy does it," Zoe warned him seeing how tightly he hugged his great-great aunt.

Zoe found room for the flowers while Ant sat on the bed next to Lilly. He made happy noises, and she cooed over him and reassured him that she was all right.

"I'm sorry I worried you all. They say I might have got too much of one thing and too little of the other," she said vaguely. "They'll have me sorted out in no time. Don't you worry." She riffled Ant's hair.

To give her a chance to have a more serious conversation with Phillip, Lilly sent Zoe and Ant to the hospital cafeteria for something to eat.

"Hospitals always have Jell-O," Zoe told him.

"I like Jell-O," Ant said as they left.

As she watched them go, Lilly sighed. "I can't tell you what a relief it is to be able to see Ant. It's such a big hardship for Zoe to bring him. Thank you for driving them here. I'm so grateful."

"I'll do whatever I can for Ant and for you. Can you tell me what the doctors said? Why did you collapse?" Phillip wanted to know.

"What I told Ant is right, more or less. When I went to the doctor that day, she changed my blood pressure medication. I got confused, and I guess I took too much of it instead of this other pill. I take so many now. It made me go all cold and clammy and knocked me down flat. They're worried about my kidneys. That's why they're keeping me for a bit."

Phillip offered to pay for anything she needed. "Any treatment, if you need a specialist..."

Lilly stopped him. "It's alright. They say two or three days in the hospital should have me right as rain."

"And after that, I would like you and Ant to come and live with me," he said, repeating his offer. With what happened, he was a lot more determined to get them out of that apartment.

"That's kind of you," she said. It sounded like she was going to refuse again.

Phillip wasn't giving up though. "I'll hire a nurse for you and..."

Lilly cut him off. "I'm not worried about me right now. It's little Ant I'm anxious about. I don't know how long Zoe can keep him. There used to be another neighbor who had him stay with her, but she moved. And my friend Bernie is in a nursing home now."

"Isn't Zoe reliable?" Phillip asked.

"She is, but her boyfriend comes to stay with her and the baby on the weekends. He drinks and yells. Ant is scared of him."

Hearing this, Phillip made a decision. "I'd like to have Ant stay with me while you're in the hospital. Zoe, or someone else you trust, can come and see

where I live and let you know that everything is all right."

She thought for a moment then nodded. "You are his uncle. And I don't want Ant at Zoe's when her boyfriend is there."

"You'll also be able to Skype with Ant and see for yourself how he's doing," Phillip told her.

She frowned. "I don't know the first thing about that."

"I'll have a tablet delivered here and arrange for someone to help you with it."

She nodded again, but Phillip could tell how worried she was. He might be Ant's uncle, but they had just met. And it wasn't just Lilly. Phillip wondered how Ant would take the news.

Since her baby was taken care of for a while, Zoe agreed to go visit Phillip's place as soon as they left the hospital. Phillip found that it wasn't as easy to persuade Ant to leave his Gran-gran though. Lilly told him he was going to go see where Phillip lived.

"If you like it there, you can come and stay with me for a few days," Phillip told him.

"Gran-gran, you come too," Ant said.

"No. I have to stay here until I feel a little bit better."

Ant looked sad when she said this. Philip tried to make the visit more appealing by telling Ant about his aquarium.

"It's this big." Phillip showed him by stretching out his arms. "It has two fish in it. One is called Bee, the other one Ruby. Do you want to see them?"

Ant's face brightened, but he still looked at Lilly with worry.

"Go on. I have to take a nap anyway. And the next time you come back to see me, you can tell me all about those fish," she told him.

Ant agreed but he wasn't happy to be leaving Lilly.

As they headed to the parking lot, Phillip called Leon and told him that Lilly seemed well.

"Oh, that's good to hear." Leon sounded relieved. "I bet it did Ant good to see her."

"Yes, it did," Phillip said then told him the plan for Ant staying over at his place.

Leon was pleased for him. Phillip could hear it in his voice. "You guys are going to have fun."

"I've been told I'm fun impaired," Phillip confessed.

"That's why video games exist."

"I remember those," Phillip said. What he remembered was that he always lost to Tony. Then there was some excessive celebrating and Tony yelling, "In your face!" Phillip couldn't quite picture Ant doing that.

Chapter 9

As soon as they arrived at his apartment, Phillip took Ant right to the aquarium. It was set up against one wall in the living room. The sun was shining through the window and filling it with light.

When Phillip saw Ant put his hands on the glass he warned him, "Don't tap on the glass. That will scare them."

"I know that one. It's the bee," Ant said while pointing at the black and yellow fish, which flitted among the algae.

"Yes, it is. It's an angel fish," Phillip told him.

"An angel too? And a bee?" Ant said, puzzled.

"Yes. It's both," Phillip told him. "That one is called Ruby because she is mostly red." Realizing that Ant might not know what a ruby was, he explained. "Rubies are red stones, like diamonds but red."

Ken had named them. Phillip didn't think fish needed names, but Ken had scoffed, "What are you planning to call them, 'hey, you'?"

"I wasn't going to call them at all. They're fish."

Ken pointed an accusing finger at him. "And you're a cold fish. Instead of something warm-blooded and cuddly like a puppy or a boyfriend, you got yourself fish. The least you can do is name them."

Actually the best Phillip could do was to let Ken name them.

Ken narrowed his eyes at each fish and decided. "I'm calling this one Ruby and this one Bee. There. Was that so hard?"

Now Ant watched them mesmerized. "Can I play with them?" he asked, turning his big blue eyes to Phillip expectantly.

As Zoe laughed, Phillip wondered what exactly he had in mind. Whatever it was, he decided to make the rules clear. "No. They are not the kind of pets you play with. You can look at them and talk to them."

"Like flowers," Ant said. "Bernie used to talk to her flowers because flowers need love to grow."

"Bernie?" Phillip said, remembering that Lilly mentioned the name.

"That's a friend of Lilly's," Zoe explained. "She went into a nursing home after a stroke laid her up."

"I miss Bernie," Ant said and looked sad.

Phillip didn't want him to start missing Lilly too so he asked. "Do you two want to see the rest of the apartment?"

Ant wasn't too interested, but Zoe agreed.

Considering that his place was "decorated like a morgue", according to Ken, Ant's lack of interest wasn't surprising. Zoe was another matter. She had whistled when they parked in front of the imposing building, once more in the lobby and also when they walked into the apartment. Now she eagerly went poking around. Leaving Ant to the company of fish, Phillip took her on a tour of the place.

"Aren't you too young to be someone's rich uncle?" she asked him as she admired his kitchen.

"I wouldn't call myself rich."

"Rich people never do," she said.

"Still, other than the fish tank, I'm afraid this place isn't to Ant's liking." Phillip was a little worried about that since the plan was for Ant to stay with him.

"Give him twenty, thirty years. He'll love it," Zoe predicted.

She might be right about that, but the current, three-year-old Ant would probably prefer brighter colors and something other than gloomy, black and white art photography on the walls.

Phillip grumbled at everything he saw and liked just fine until now then he showed Zoe the room where Ant would be staying. It was a guest room in name only. No one had ever stayed there. While Zoe eyed the room's simple but high end black furniture and nodded, Phillip looked at the room and frowned. He would have to do something to brighten it up for Ant.

While making plans for the room, Phillip got some basic information from Zoe. He asked if Ant went to preschool or daycare. He didn't. Phillip also wanted to find out about Ant's mother and what happened to her. Ant was in the living room, preoccupied with the fish, so they could talk undisturbed.

As they stood in the doorway of the guest room, he asked Zoe about Ant's mother. Phillip explained why he was asking her. "I wanted to talk to Lilly about her great-niece, but now that she isn't well, I don't want to burden her. I thought it might be difficult for her to talk about Joan. Can you tell me what happened to her?"

"What Lilly was afraid of, that's what happened. Joan overdosed a little less than a year ago. Before that, she stayed with Lilly off and on. After she had Ant, she left him with Lilly while she disappeared for weeks." Zoe sighed. "Then one time she didn't come back. Lilly was always the one taking care of Ant anyway. She took good care of him, but she's so old and she isn't well. Her eyes are failing her. You see how she can't get her pills right. With her health, Lilly really should be in a nursing home."

"She doesn't want to go," Phillip guessed.

Zoe nodded. "She doesn't want to leave Ant and have him go into foster care. She's afraid of what will happen to him, where he'll end up. But he has you now."

"I'll make sure Lilly has nothing to worry about," Phillip said as they took one last look around the minimalist guest room. "And I'll make this place more homey for Ant's visit."

"That fish tank of yours won him over," Zoe said as they headed back to the living room. Ant wasn't there though. Zoe's phone rang and Phillip left her to go in search of Ant.

Phillip found him standing at the door to his office, looking in. At first he

didn't know why. Then he remembered the gifts he bought were in there.

Last night he had lined them up on the sofa in his office and agonized over which two he should give Ant first. He had never taken so long to make a decision in his life. That's because Tony's son was more important to him than anything. When he first met Ant, it was so unexpected. Phillip hadn't been prepared for their meeting at all. The next time he wanted to make a good second impression. But with Lilly in the hospital, things didn't quite work out like he planned.

Ant looked up at him as he came over. "Is there another kid?" he asked seeing the toys set up on the leather sofa in the office.

"Another kid? No," Phillip told him. "Those are for you. I was going to give them to you tomorrow."

Ant made a surprised noise. Phillip smiled at him and brought him into his office.

"You can open two of them now," Phillip said since that had been his plan for the next time he saw him.

Much like his uncle, Ant took forever to decide which two should go first. Finally he made his pick.

"Just remember that those others are yours too, and they'll be waiting here for you," Phillip told him.

Hanging up her phone, Zoe came over. She was ready to head home. On the way out, Ant said a long goodbye to the fish.

Since Zoe's boyfriend wasn't coming by until the day after tomorrow, Phillip drove both her and Ant back to her place. He arranged to pick up Ant before her boyfriend arrived. He would first take him to visit Lilly then bring him to his place. As much as he worried about it, Phillip also looked forward to spending time with Ant.

During the drive, Zoe called Lilly and told her about Phillip's apartment. She didn't mention anything about it looking like a morgue. She only had good things to say before she let Lilly talk to Ant for a while and hear all about the fish and the toys.

In Danning, they stopped at her cousin's place first. It was an even worse building than the one where Ant lived. Philip could see cardboard closing off one window. He certainly hoped Zoe's cousin didn't live there.

As Zoe got out of the car, Phillip stopped her. "Should I give you some money to give to your cousin for her help?" Seeing where she lived, he figured she could use a little extra money.

Zoe waved her hand. "Oh, no need for that. She owes me for babysitting her brats."

"I'd really like to," Phillip said. He knew neither Zoe nor her cousin could afford to refuse his money.

"It would be weird to pay my cousin for babysitting," Zoe said and went in to get her baby.

In front of her place, Phillip got out along with her and Ant. She had her baby in a carrier and she was sleeping.

"It's good of you to take care of Ant considering you have your hands full with your own baby," Phillip told Zoe as he walked her to her door.

"She isn't too much trouble, and Ant isn't either. He's such a quiet little thing." She looked over at him where he was peering into the mailboxes.

"Would it be weird if I offered to pay you for babysitting him? I'm not your cousin after all," Phillip asked as Zoe walked over to get her mail.

"As long as you're taking care of Ant and looking out for Lilly, it's all good. It's not like I'm feeding him lobster. I can afford an extra helping of mac and cheese," Zoe said.

"Mac and cheese?" Ant said, overhearing her.

"That's what's for dinner," Zoe told him and he looked overjoyed.

Phillip wondered if he could make him smile that easily.

"Please accept this." Phillip handed Zoe some money as she started to head inside. Seeing she was about to refuse again, he told her, "It's not for you. It's for the baby, for inconveniencing her."

With a raised eyebrow and a shake of her head, Zoe took his money. "This is too much," she protested and tried to give it back.

"The baby isn't complaining," Phillip said looking down at her peaceful expression.

Zoe gave up and pocketed the money. Now it was time to leave Ant, and Phillip found it so hard to go to his car and drive away. To give himself a push, he went over everything he had to do to make his place suitable for Ant. Phillip kneeled in front of him. "I'll see you soon," he promised.

Ant nodded in agreement. "Bye, Uncle Phillip!" he yelled after him.

As he pulled out of the parking lot, he saw Ant standing on the front steps and waving for as long as he was in sight.

Chapter 10

As soon as he got to the office the next day, Phillip continued what he had spent half the night trying to do. He wanted to transform his apartment for Ant, or at least the guest room. It was more than he needed to do just for a visit, but he wanted Ant to like it and feel comfortable. In the future, when Lilly was better, he hoped Ant would visit him often.

He had been looking at colorful, cartoonish furnishings until his eyes hurt, and he was ready to keep doing it. If it meant spending time with his newfound nephew, he would turn his whole apartment into a playground. That might have been overly ambitious since he could hardly manage to furnish one room to a child's liking.

He was still stuck on picking out a bed. There were beds with slides, beds shaped like spaceships and pirate ships, log cabins, castles, school busses and locomotives. So many were shaped like racecars, but Phillip certainly wasn't getting Ant one of those.

While Phillip struggled with too many choices, Leon brought in his mail and let him know that McCain needed him to sign off on the final updates to a proposal.

"I'll have it for him. I think I should at least pretend that I work here. Right now I'm trying to choose the perfect bed for a little boy," Phillip told him.

"How is it going?"

"It's all a big blur. I'm trying to think back to when I was three. That's an even bigger blur. Ken told me that he doesn't believe I was ever a child. He said I was born as a thirty-year-old in a suit."

"You're thirty?" Leon asked, looking at him appraisingly.

"No. I'm twenty-seven," Phillip said defensively. "And when Ken said that, I was twenty-three."

"I see. Don't listen to Ken. Just trust your instincts and good luck. I need to get back to emailing Mrs. Lahari some more spreadsheets. I think I'm really working for her these days," Leon said as he left.

It was true. Leon spent more time assisting her than he did Phillip. He had cut back on his appointments so he could get ready for Ant's visit and also so he would be available in case he or Lilly needed anything. He had to be able to drop everything on a moment's notice.

With his priorities turned upside down, he was no longer the man to handle the company's most important clients. At most he could supervise and advise. Phillip was surprised that he had no qualms about that. Work just couldn't compare to the immense joy of finding Tony's son, a child he wasn't sure even existed. It was like his ambition simply evaporated in the face of a curly haired little boy in his life.

Since Ant was now his number one priority, he could channel the drive and determination that had served him in his career into making him happy. Phillip might feel out of his depth, but if he put his mind to it, he could do

this. He could furnish at least one room in time for Ant's visit.

Or he could run to Leon and beg for his help. Faced with the daunting task of choosing what a little boy would like among so many options, none of which could be delivered on time, Phillip got desperate. He went out to talk to Leon.

He was relieved to see that he was just finishing up the assignment Mrs. Lahari had given him. Seeing him lurking there, Leon swiveled his chair to face him.

"You will owe that woman the biggest bunch of flowers," he said.

Phillip had to agree. "I'll owe her a raise and possibly a promotion. But order the flowers as well and have them sent to her."

"She mentioned how much she loves orchids," Leon hinted.

"Have one sitting on her desk tomorrow."

"OK. I'm ordering it," Leon said as he swilled back to face his computer monitor.

Phillip made his next request less decisively. He even stammered a little. "When you're done with that, umm, could you help me with shopping for Ant?"

Leon looked over his shoulder and smiled at him. "That sounds more like fun than work."

"It does?" Phillip said, but he was distracted by how Leon's suit stretched over his broad shoulder's and his back.

"Sure. But it would be better to go to an actual store and see the stuff in person. Plus you can take most of it home right away instead of wondering if it's going to arrive on time."

"That might work, but only if you come with me."

"It would be my pleasure," Leon said and he looked genuinely happy to come along.

In his online search, Phillip had already come across Mitchell's so that's where they went. Leon stopped just inside the doors of the kid's furniture store and asked, "Where do we start?"

Phillip was just as much at a loss as when he was shopping online. "You're leading this expedition. You decide," he said to Leon helplessly.

"Still no luck channeling your inner three-year-old? OK. I'll be your navigator again," Leon said and pointed to the right.

Phillip went along with him and smiled. He was amazed that having Leon by his side made this shopping trip into a pleasure, not a chore.

"Check it out, toy chests. You have to have one of those," Leon told him.

"One?"

"Several?" Noticing that Phillip's eye was naturally drawn to traditional, wooden chests, he told him, "Don't look at those. It's not for your toys. Check this out. This one is cool." Leon pointed out a chest that looked like an old-fashioned train car.

"It doesn't seem big enough," Phillip said as Leon opened it.

"Oh, man, you're out of control. He's going to need a warehouse, not a toy chest. OK, how about the one in the shape of an alligator? It's bigger and it has wheels." As he tested it out, Leon got a bright-eyed look that told Phillip that it was the right choice.

From there, they moved on to the most important thing – the bed. While Phillip stared at the rows of colorful beds, Leon went right up to a bed shaped like a red Formula One car.

"No racecar beds," Phillip said. Leon could hear the edge in his voice and he winced. "Sorry..." Phillip said, regretting his tone.

Leon waved off his apology. "No. I'm sorry. You told me how your brother died. I should have realized."

"It's all right. Ant would probably love it, but I think it might give me nightmares," Phillip confessed. "At least that narrows down our choices."

There weren't as many themed beds here as he had seen online, just enough of them to confuse Phillip. After they had looked around, he was no closer to a decision so he turned to Leon.

"Which one?"

"Hmm," Leon said and made a face at a bed in the shape of a soccer field and the one that closed up on top like a tent. "None of them scream out, 'I'm the one.'"

"Do we go to look somewhere else?" Phillip wondered. "That bed has to be there by midday tomorrow so everything can be set up. Maybe I can get him a normal bed he can grow into, and the sheets will make it fun?"

Leon's face fell. He was obviously not happy with that idea when they were surrounded by so many cooler options. Then he spotted something in the back. "Ooh, a dinosaur bed!"

The headboard was a green, friendly looking dinosaur with a long neck, and Leon was in love with it. That was enough reason for Phillip to buy it, but he also had a feeling that Ant would like it. They got sheets with the same theme and also a set with frogs as well as a pillow shaped like a frog's head. A striped chest of drawers, a colorful desk with a built in blackboard completed the bedroom set. They also got a gooseneck lamp with a clock as its base and a fuzzy polka dot rug. Phillip arranged for everything to be delivered and set up the next morning.

"It's amazing that they can have it done so fast. I guess money talks," Leon said as they left the store loaded down with everything that could fit in Phillip's car.

"I just want to make sure Ant walks in and likes what he sees," Phillip said and opened the trunk of his car.

"He will. I guarantee it. The sleepover will be a hit," Leon predicted.

"I hope so. At least the room will be, thanks to you. Do you want to be there when Ant sees it?" Phillip asked suddenly. The invitation surprised both him and Leon.

"Really? I'd love to see his face when he gets a load of all this," Leon said looking into the trunk which now held colorful room accessories as well as some toys they picked up while the order was being written up.

"I think Ant would like to have you there as well."

Inviting Leon wasn't a smart move, but Phillip knew Ant would be happy to see him. That was reason enough to set aside his reservations, but it wasn't his whole reason. When he asked for his help on this shopping trip, he hadn't realized yet that spending time with Leon outside the office would be so addictive.

Things were more formal between them at the office. Plus these days, he was keeping Leon and everyone else busy with extra work. But since Leon became his assistant, Phillip had noticed that he looked forward to going to work in a new way, with an unfamiliar excitement stirring deep inside him. It was like he expected something wonderful might happen there.

The highlight of his morning was that precise moment when he entered his outer office and first caught sight of Leon behind his desk. There was a jolt of something painful and sweet that Phillip tried to repress. In fact he tried to repress every feeling and impulse that concerned Leon, and then he sabotaged himself by begging for his help and spending too much time with him.

He wanted to keep him at a distance and here he was drawing him into his life and asking him to share the most important moments with the most precious person in his life. Working at cross-purposes like that, Phillip had to ask himself what was he really trying to do. Wasn't this the worst possible time to complicate his life with an infatuation with his assistant?

Chapter 11

Leaving work early the next day, Phillip took Ant to visit Lilly then brought him home with him. It was the first time Ant got to ride in his new car seat. As they drove away from the hospital, Phillip worried that Ant might be nervous about staying over, but he was excited to see the fish. Once Phillip told him Leon was going to be there, he was excited about that too.

When they arrived, Leon was waiting in front of Phillip's building with a shopping bag in his hand. He came over to the car as Phillip got out and went to unbuckle Ant from his car seat.

"You look like an astronaut strapped into that thing," Leon told Ant, who grinned up at him.

"We're going to see the fishes!" Ant told him.

"I can't wait," Leon said. "And then I'll show you what I brought." Leon held up the bag but wouldn't tell them what was in it. As soon as they got to apartment, he made a b-line for the kitchen and put the bag in the freezer.

Phillip eyed him and shook his head as he came back to the living room. "You don't think that might be a dead giveaway?"

"No," Leon claimed while Ant looked like he might have a pretty good idea what was in that bag. "You don't know. It might be fish sticks."

"Fishes!" Ant said and ran over to the aquarium. Then he came back, grabbed Leon by the hand and took him over for introductions.

After telling Leon which one was the "angel bee" and which one was Ruby, it was time to show Ant his room. That's when Phillip got nervous. He was desperate for Ant to like it.

"I can't wait to see it," Leon said.

"Leon helped me pick things out," Phillip told Ant just as he opened the door to his room.

Ant let out a gasp. He stepped inside tentatively at first then more boldly as the toys and the colorful furniture drew him in.

"This is your room whenever you come over to stay with me," Phillip told him. "What do you think of your bed?"

"It's a dinosaur! Is he mine? Can I name him?" Ant asked.

"Of course you can," Phillip told him.

"What should I name him?" he asked looking from Phillip to Leon.

"How about Dino, the dinosaur?" Phillip suggested.

Ant frowned and looked at Leon for his opinion. Leon shrugged, unimpressed.

But he had an idea too. "How about Herby, the herbivore?"

"How is that better?" Phillip asked while Ant looked confused. "Herbivores like to eat plants," he explained.

"And look at this green guy. He's a herbivore all the way," Leon said pointing at the friendly dinosaur who didn't look the least bit interested in devouring a child while he slept.

"Does he like to eat ice cream?" Ant asked.

"What ice cream?" Leon said, still trying to hide his secret.

"In the freezer," Ant told him.

"Yes. He likes ice cream," Phillip said.

"Herby likes ice cream. Herby," Ant said testing out the name, then he nodded giving it his final approval.

"How is your name better than mine?" Phillip wondered.

Leon only shrugged.

From there, Leon took Ant over to the window in the living room and picked him up. He held him high so he could get a good look at the view.

"I can see everything!" Ant said.

He was kind of right. Half the city stretched out below. A handful of skyscrapers jutted up into the sky and Winslow Bridge spanned the river in the distance.

"It will be fun to look out this window when it's dark," Leon said, then turned to Phillip for confirmation. "Right?"

"We can look at it right before your bedtime," Phillip said to Ant.

"Bedtime? I don't like bedtime," Ant said with a frown.

"What kid does?" Leon said and set him down on his own feet.

Right away Ant darted off to the aquarium.

Since Ant was busy, Phillip and Leon went to the kitchen. Leon had already been there, but now he took a long hard look at Phillip's ultra modern, minimalist setup.

Being alone with him sent a shiver up and down Phillip's spine. As Phillip held his breath, Leon ran his long fingers over the cool slab of striped gray marble that was his countertop. Then he turned his eyes up to the smoky gray glass that fronted the cabinets.

"It's slick. It's equipped," Leon said as he examined the appliances. "This is a kitchen in theory only. This is an anti-kitchen. You don't cook, do you?" he said and looked at Phillip accusingly.

"I do cook, actually."

"Then why is it so clean?" Leon asked with a gotcha look in his eyes.

"Because I also clean up."

"I'll believe it when I see it," Leon said while giving Phillip a sexy, suspicious look.

"I'll be happy to cook for you any time," Phillip said then realized that he shouldn't have. And on top of that, he had put too much feeling into his words.

He was about to try to pull back a little when Ant whispered from behind him, "Macaroni and cheese."

Turning around, Phillip asked him, "Is that what you would like to eat?"

Ant nodded.

"You can't possibly have a box of mac and cheese sitting in this kitchen," Leon said in complete disbelief.

Phillip didn't bother to deny it. He simply opened a cabinet and showed him three different boxes lined up right in front. "Pick one," he said to Ant.

Phillip made the macaroni and cheese under Leon and Ant's watchful eyes. Leon was holding up Ant so he could see. There were no complaints so far.

"It looks like your uncle knows what he's doing," Leon said.

Ant nodded and smiled at Phillip with approval though all he did was mix a processed cheese product with some boiled pasta.

Leon didn't stay long after they ate the ice cream he had brought for dessert. It was clear he wanted to give Phillip some time alone with Ant before his bedtime.

"That was an interesting dinner," Leon said as Phillip walked him to the door.

"I thought I should feed him something familiar. I wanted to make Ant feel at home," Phillip explained.

"You certainly did that," Leon said with a smile.

"I was worried. When Ken first saw this place all decorated, he yelled at me. 'You have this great apartment and you do this to it. You're worse than a murderer.'"

"Wow. Harsh. I wouldn't say it's that bad. That fish tank and Ant's room are pretty great."

"Ant does seem to like his room, doesn't he?" Phillip said.

"Without a doubt."

Phillip turned to see Ant in the living room. He was explaining what he was watching on TV to Bee and Ruby.

"Thanks for inviting me," Leon said.

"Thank you for being here and bringing dessert. I have to admit, I'm not sure I'll know what to do now that I have Ant all to myself."

"You should trust yourself more. You're doing fine."

"Thank you," Phillip said as Leon went out to call the elevator. He didn't know why his approval meant so much to him, but it did.

As he went back in, Phillip didn't have to think hard about the next order of business. The tablet he had sent to the hospital was delivered and an orderly was standing by to help Lilly. With his help, she got to speak to Ant and see his new room. She also got to meet the fish. Phillip knew that seeing Ant happy and excited would help put her mind at ease. He arranged to have them Skype again in the morning.

"You'll be able to see that I'm feeding Ant a good breakfast," he told Lilly.

She then thanked him for taking care of Ant, but that didn't seem right to Phillip. He didn't deserve any thanks. He was so happy to have Ant there.

Once they were finished Skyping, Phillip was at a loss. Then he remembered that he had a lifetime of catching up to do with Ant.

"Do you want to see some pictures of your dad?" Phillip asked.

Ant got so excited, he couldn't say a word. As his eyes went wide, he only nodded. Phillip got his laptop and tried to prepare himself.

Since Tony died, he hadn't looked at any pictures of Tony except the ones in the file from the lawyer. Now he braced himself as he turned on the laptop and had Ant sit next to him on the sofa. He watched as Ant pulled his feet up and hugged his knees like he was trying to contain his excitement. That tiny child simply broke his heart.

The pictures he showed Ant were often blurry as Phillip's vision clouded with the tears he was holding back. Leaning forward eagerly, Ant was most interested in the pictures of Tony as a kid. Seeing Phillip as a kid puzzled him though. He would look from the picture back to the grown-up Phillip sitting next to him and frown like what he was seeing just didn't add up.

Phillip would have given anything to have Tony sitting right there with Ant, showing him those same pictures, joking around and telling him about all the crazy things he did. Phillip was a poor substitute, hardly trusting himself to speak. He did manage to tell Ant one story. He did it as he put him to bed.

It was about how Tony had discovered a small anthill in their back yard. He was seven and he decided to feed the ants candy. Their parents were not happy to see what he was doing.

"But they're my friends!" Tony protested.

"He liked ants," Ant said, delighted to hear it.

"He did. And he would have loved you so much," Phillip told him and kissed the top of his curly head before he tucked him in for the night.

After watching Ant fall asleep, Phillip retreated to his office to do some work. Darkness thickened around him, but he didn't go to bed. He knew it would be useless. He might as well catch up on the work he had neglected these past few days.

Hours later, he heard the sound of little feet on hardwood and then the squeak of the leather on his office couch. He turned to find Ant curled up on it.

Getting up and going over to him, Phillip said, "You could have at least brought your blanket."

He went to get it. Going into Ant's colorful bedroom, Phillip saw the blanket halfway off the bed. He sighed as he picked it up. He thought after making the guest room more kid friendly that Ant would sleep there more willingly.

He went back to his office with the blanket and a pillow. Ant was still on the couch but sitting up now. Phillip had him lie down.

"I thought you liked your room," he said as he put the pillow under Ant's blond head and tucked the blanket around him.

"I like it," Ant said. "But I like it with you too."

As he made Ant more comfortable, Phillip looked down at him with

amazement. He was such a little thing, but he was all that mattered to Phillip. He let him stay there for a little while until he got sleepy again. Then he took the little sleepyhead back to his bed and stayed with him until he was sound asleep.

Chapter 12

After he left Phillip's place, Leon texted with Pavel for a while. He was at a club, sending Leon incomprehensible updates. Finally Leon called him.

He could hear "Mr. Saxobeat" in the background as Pavel answered. He raised his voice to be heard over the noise. "I'm pretty sure you're drunk-texting me. You want me to come pick you up?"

Pavel tried to convince him he was "this close" to bagging this hot guy, but eventually gave it up and accepted the platonic ride Leon was offering him. Big, blond and burly, Pavel dwarfed the passenger seat of Leon's Ford.

"Did I tell you about my buddy, Ray?" Pavel asked too loudly as Leon drove him home. He was still talking at the volume more appropriate for a noisy club.

"You mean your fuck buddy, Ray?"

"Yes! Him," Pavel said. He slapped Leon's arm and laughed, probably remembering some wild times.

"Watch it. I'm driving here. Are you going to tell me how you two used to console each other when you had to go home alone?"

"Yes! How did you know?"

"Because you always tell me the same thing when you don't score, and I always say sorry I can't be your fuck buddy," Leon said.

"That's OK. I still love you," Pavel told him and leaned his big head on Leon's shoulder as he drove. Then he reached for the steering wheel, and Leon slapped his hand away.

Pavel never reached for anything else. Drunk or sober, he knew that Leon couldn't handle it.

And he knew why too. Leon remembered how Pavel shook him awake, telling him everything was OK. It took Leon several agonizing seconds to focus on his face and realize where he was. That was when Leon was new in town and he and Pavel were roommates.

After scaring the hell out of him and making him jump out of bed to deal with one of his nightmares, Leon owed him the truth. Leon gave him the short version. Now Pavel was his best friend and totally hands off when it came to Leon no matter how drunk and horny he was.

That's why he would probably be surprised to find out how hard Leon was lusting after his boss these days. Leon was certainly surprised, and it started on day one. Nervous, worried about his first day on the job, Leon had still noticed Phillip's masculine beauty, both hidden and enhanced by that suit. But now he felt like his eyes were really open, seeing Phillip more clearly, seeing his warm and loving heart.

That wasn't a positive development at all. It certainly didn't do anything to cool him down. Every morning, Leon was arriving to work early like some kind of kiss-ass, glancing toward the door every few seconds, waiting impatiently for Phillip so he could spend all day pretending the man had no

effect on him at all.

But what choice did he have? He had to hide how his heart hammered in his chest. Phillip was still the same man he had met that first day at the office – serious, formal and reserved. Holding himself back and out of his reach, he only drove Leon to crazy thoughts. He was always tempted to brush up against him just a little, like it was an accident.

Leon craved that jolt, that feverish shudder of deep need. Oh, God, he felt it even just thinking about the man. If he could close that distance, erase the space between them and feel the heat and the steely hardness of his body. He wanted to run his hands all over him, break through the button-down exterior to what was inside.

And then what, crash and burn, get slapped down for acting inappropriately at the office? Or maybe Leon would freeze up, go dead inside as he had whenever a guy made a move on him in the past.

No. What he needed to do was rein it in and act professional. That meant he shouldn't even think about brushing up against him. Phillip was too hot to touch, and with his limited experience and his issues, Leon wasn't equipped to handle him.

The next morning when Phillip arrived at work, it wasn't what Leon expected. He was surprised to see Philip holding Ant's hand and leading him into the office.

On catching sight of that curly, blond head, Leon stood up behind his desk. "Ant-man!"

Ant gave him a big smile. "Leon! You're here!"

"Of course I am. I work here," Leon said.

"And today you do too," Phillip said to Ant. "Hi, Leon. Ant will be spending the day with us."

As Ant looked around with curious eyes, Phillip took him into his office. Leon could hear Ant and Phillip talking as he got together some paperwork. A little later, Leon went in and found that Ant was perched on Phillip's desk, kicking his feet.

"He lets you sit on his desk? Wow," Leon said as he brought in the papers and waited for Phillip to look them over.

"Is it OK, Uncle Phillip?" Ant asked now worried that he was doing something wrong.

"Of course it's OK. I put you there, didn't I?" Phillip said and smiled at him.

Leon couldn't believe that this was his boss. He was beaming at Ant. No doubt about it, that little guy melted his heart.

Just then Phillip got an important phone call. Hearing the name of the caller, Leon quickly handed him the files he needed. Phillip reached for them blindly, and his hand covered Leon's for a moment. Phillip's gray eyes met his. Leon held his breath and waited for the shudder to pass through his body. He heard Phillip speak a few halting words before he blinked and turned his attention to

the files in front of him.

Knowing this would be a long and involved conversation, Leon took Ant off his desk.

"You want to meet your coworkers?" Leon asked him.

Ant nodded, but he looked like he was wondering what coworkers were.

"Coworkers aren't fish, so don't get too excited," Leon told him. He gave Phillip one last look as he left. Did he imagine what happened when they touched? Probably. He was starved for sex and scared of it. He couldn't trust himself, but for some reason he seemed to trust Phillip instinctively and with no reservations.

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Phillip was still recovering from that brief contact as he watched Leon and Ant leave. A stray touch shouldn't have so much power over him. He shouldn't be left feverish and trembling inside, but there he was struggling to speak or form a coherent thought.

Too many distractions had made him careless and now he was paying the price. He found it hard to focus on their most important client until Leon was completely out of sight and he couldn't hear his voice as he spoke to Ant. Then he took a deep breath and gave his attention to business.

A little later he heard Leon and Ant as they came back.

"Your Gran-gran calls you her little man that means you're Ant-man. And Ant-man is a superhero," Leon was explaining to him.

"Ant-man!" Ant said and raised his arms straight up in the air, his fists closed tight.

Leon praised him, "That's what I'm talking about."

He kept Ant busy in the outer office until Phillip went out to see what they were up to. They were sitting on the floor, and Leon was telling Ant, "We'll make up our own story, the Lion and the Ant."

"Uncle Phillip and the Lion and the Ant," Ant suggested.

"That's even better." Turning to Phillip, Leon asked, "You want to be in the story?"

"Yes, I do. Will I be a good guy?" Phillip asked.

"Everyone is good guys!" Ant said.

"Yes, we are," Leon agreed. As he got up from the floor and smiled at him, Phillip's heart beat so fast and hard that he was afraid to breathe. He didn't want to look away from him until Ant jumped up from the floor too.

"Are we going to visit Gran-gran?" he asked.

"Soon," Phillip told him.

During lunch he planned to drive Ant to visit Lilly, but there was something else on his mind as well. Once again he found himself needing Leon's help. He hated to turn to him again, but he felt he was his best option.

He sent Ant to his office and stayed behind to talk to Leon. "Do you mind coming with us when we go to see Lilly? I'd like to speak with her without Ant there, and if you could watch him while we talk that would be a big help. I know it's an imposition but..."

Leon cut him off. "It's not an imposition. Ant is great. I don't mind watching him."

Phillip was so relieved that he forgot himself again and gazed at Leon too long. He had never met anyone who was so good and at the same time sexually irresistible to him. Even as he asked for more of his time, Phillip didn't have a clue how he would ever keep his feelings under control around him.

Chapter 13

With Leon joining them, the ride to the hospital was a lot more fun. Leon and Ant came up with stories that made less and less sense as they went along, but made Ant giggle. Ant was an astronaut and a fish and he had superpowers and ate lots of ice cream. Leon went with the flow easily while Phillip couldn't keep up. Leon scolded him for it, but Ant always came to his defense.

"Look at that, Ant-man to the rescue," Leon said.

"Ant-man!"

In the rear view mirror, Phillip saw Ant raise his arms high. Usually Ant was so quiet, but whenever Leon was around, it was easy to see that Ant was a happy child.

Once they were at the hospital, Phillip saw signs that Ant was starting to become uneasy, like last time. He and Leon held his hands, and Phillip pointed out the gift shop again. "Leon will help you pick out something nice, and I'll go up to have a little talk with your Gran-gran. OK?"

Ant nodded and took Leon's hand with both of his.

"We'll get her something really good," Leon told him.

Even as he walked away from them, Phillip was sure that Ant would be OK with Leon taking care of him.

Once he got up to her room, he saw that Lilly looked better than last time he saw her. She was wearing a thin, blue sweater over her hospital gown. She pulled it closer around her as she sat up higher and also smoothed down her hair. Right away she asked for Ant.

"He's with Leon. There was something I wanted to discuss with you first." Not wanting to keep Lilly from seeing Ant for too long, Phillip got right to the point. "Would you reconsider moving in with me after you're released from here? I would hire someone to assist you until you're fully recovered."

Once again Lilly refused the offer. "Oh, it would be no good for you to have an old lady living with you. I just couldn't."

"OK, then. What if I found a house for you and Ant in Easton? I would pay for it..."

"To live at your expense? I just couldn't."

"But you can't stay home alone with only Ant. You need someone to look after you, and you need a place without so many stairs."

Lilly nodded as if she agreed, but it turned out she had a plan of her own. "There's a spot for me at Morning Glen nursing home. That's where my friend Bernie is. She's been in there ever since she had her stroke. I go and see her whenever I can. That's where I'd like to go if you'd take Ant."

Phillip was stunned. "Ant would live with me?" he asked once he got his voice back.

Lilly looked sad as she answered. "He needs someone younger taking care

of him. There are times when he can do more for me than I can for him. And if I croak on him... To have him find me, that's no good. The way I passed out. That could have been it for me." Lilly looked at him expectantly.

"I would be happy to have Ant living with me, but I don't know about Morning Glen," Phillip told her. He quickly looked it up on his phone and he didn't like what he saw. The place didn't have the best reputation. "How about this, when you are released from here, would you let me take you to visit your friend, Bernie? I would like to see Morning Glen for myself, if you don't mind."

Lilly smiled shakily and nodded. "Ant should come too. Bernie would love to see him, and he's fond of her too."

"Of course."

A little later, Leon and Ant came back with a big box of fancy chocolates for Lilly.

"Oh, my. You'll have to help me eat these," Lilly told Ant.

Phillip gave Ant his phone so he could show Lilly pictures of him at the office, including one of him sitting in Phillip's chair. Lilly called him her little working man. Ant managed to look both shy and proud about that.

Phillip and Leon stepped outside so Ant and Lilly could spend time together. As soon as they were alone, Phillip told Leon what Lilly had proposed. He couldn't hold it in. The thought of Ant actually living with him was overwhelming.

"Wow. That's great," Leon said and grinned at him.

"I hope Ant will be OK with it." Phillip was worried but Leon had no reservations.

"He'll love it. I'm sure he'll miss Lilly..."

"I have to make sure that wherever she lives is a good place." That nursing home was another thing that concerned him. Phillip frowned. He had a lot of trouble enjoying the goods news about Ant at the moment.

Leon saw the state he was in. "I think you might be the best thing that could have happened to Ant and Lilly. Try not to worry too much. You're a capable guy. You can handle whatever comes up."

"So far the only reason I was able to get anything done is because you've helped me." Phillip gave Leon his warmest smile.

"All I did was help you shop. I like seeing a little kid happy. I think back to my own childhood. If someone had swooped in to make everything better..." Leon didn't finish. He just shrugged and looked away.

"I'm sorry."

Leon turned to him and smiled. "Look at you. You want to go back in time and fix everything that went wrong when I was kid, don't you?"

"I would if I could," Phillip said honestly and Leon laughed.

"And that's why I don't mind helping you if you need me. You're a good guy doing a good thing."

Phillip shook his head. "Ant is my only family, and I want him to be in my life. I'm doing this for myself."

"And for your late brother too, but you wouldn't worry so much about Lilly if you only cared about getting Ant for yourself," Leon pointed out.

"Lilly matters to Ant so she matters to me too."

"I think it's great that she wants to do what's best for him," Leon said. His face was grave and Phillip wondered what was behind these moments of sorrow that slipped through his easygoing demeanor. It hurt him to think that Leon had some kind of hidden sorrow. It was so unlike Phillip to pry, but he wanted to find out what kind of burden he carried. He wanted to know Leon.

Chapter 14

Talking to Phillip about Ant, Leon couldn't help but think of himself as a kid. He was so glad that Ant had Lilly before Phillip came along. She might be old and frail but she had a good heart.

When he had first met Ant, Leon looked for a some small reflection of himself in that curly-headed boy, but he didn't find anything. There was no storehouse of fear inside that little body. Ant was OK and that was thanks to Lilly. And now thanks to Phillip, he was going to be even better.

The look on his face as he tried to forget about himself and focus only on Ant must have given away too much of what he was feeling because Phillip gave him a look of concern.

"Let's sit down," Phillip said and led him to some chairs in a waiting area nearby.

They sat across from each other, their knees almost touching. Leon could tell Phillip wanted to talk to him.

"You and Ant share a home town, but I got the impression that you spent a very different childhood there. Why was your childhood so unhappy?" Phillip asked him.

Normally Leon wouldn't want to get into all that, but if Phillip wanted to know, he couldn't deny him. Leon tried to sum it up. "Because my mother would set her sights on one thing and turn a blind eye to everything else." Whenever he thought of her in the years when he was growing up, she was looking away. "There was always some man who was everything to her until another one came along. The next guy was the answer to all her problems. This one wouldn't be a dirtbag. He would pay the bills, give us a nice place to live, keep us safe. My father certainly didn't. He came and went as he pleased. I know he gambled, but I don't know what else he was up to. He was quite a character." Leon could still see his big smile and the sparkle in his eyes. Always ready with a joke, his father had the biggest, loudest laugh. Coming to town driving a big car and wearing nice clothes, he was generous with money when it came to treats and toys, but not when it came to paying rent or medical bills. Leon didn't know the difference. "When my dad was in town, those were fun times. He took me places, bought me things, and we had a blast. But then in a day or two, he would disappear. I wanted him to take me with him, take me away from what Mom's boyfriends did to me."

"They hurt you?" A dark look came into Phillip's eyes. Leon knew they must reflect what was in his own.

Leon didn't want to give Phillip the wrong idea. "They weren't all bad. One guy had two kids of his own. He was nice to me, but he went back to his ex. It was always the worst ones that stayed, or at least they stuck in my mind so it seemed like they were around forever. One of them molested me for most of a year. I was six. It was hell, but the next day it wouldn't even seem real. But if it wasn't real, where did all this pain inside me come from? I was so confused.

There was my mom smiling at him, laughing with him, kissing him. That couldn't be the same guy who hurt me. I was afraid to tell her because I thought she might already know. Every time I opened my mouth, the words would just die, nothing would come out. All the pain stayed right inside me, growing all the time. Then he died in a motorcycle accident and it all ended. I just wanted to forget it. But a few years later, another one of Mom's boyfriends left me alone with his brother a few times. I think he knew what his brother was and he did it deliberately. I was older then and more aware of what was happening, but I still couldn't do anything to stop it. Even after it was over, I relived that time in my nightmares and waited for the next time someone would hurt me. Barry didn't disappoint me. He was the next guy in my mother's life, and he was around for a long while. He liked to get creative with his punishments. When I knocked down his beer bottle, he locked me in the dark basement all night. Mom made some weak objections, but she didn't stop him when he shoved me down there and locked the door. Another time he hosed me down and made me stand outside in the middle of winter because I tracked mud into the house. I could see my mom looking out of the kitchen window at me while I shivered and my teeth chattered." Leon felt chilled to the bone just thinking of it. His mother came and went from the window, but she never went out to him. Afterwards she did have some words of wisdom for him. "When I was finally allowed back inside with my hands turning blue and my feet numb, she said Barry was the man of the house and I had to mind him."

"Your father didn't know about this?" Phillip asked, his voice a hoarse whisper.

"It was hard to reach my dad on the phone. He moved a lot. Half the time he was running and hiding from someone he owed money to. But even when I did reach him and asked him to come, he told me he couldn't come to get me. I asked just to see him at least. He said, 'If I come by, all your mother will do is ask me for money.' So he didn't come to see me, to check on me, to make sure I was OK because my mom might ask him for money." Leon smiled bitterly and shook his head. "And I still pinned all my hopes on him. He was going to come and save me and take me away. I knew better than to hope that my mom would help me. She was right there and she didn't do a thing. It was easier to believe in my dad. He was less real to me. I could make up any story I wanted about him and why he stayed away while I suffered."

"Both your parents failed you." As Phillip spoke, Leon could hear the tightness in his voice and the anger in his words.

"It doesn't do any good to blame them now. I haven't seen my dad for years. I only see my mom sometimes. She's married now. Her husband hates me for being gay, but he treats her OK."

"I'll make a wild guess that she still doesn't stand up for you," Phillip said, sounding as bitter as Leon felt.

"I don't expect it any more," Leon said then he reconsidered. "Or maybe I

do. There's always some small part of me that's listening for her to speak up, raise her voice to say, 'You leave my boy alone, you son of a bitch.' Maybe throw in a threat or two. But that's not her."

Phillip reached out and barely touched his arm when Ant ran out of Lilly's room, carrying Phillip's phone.

"Uncle Phillip, I touched the blue thing on your phone. Me and Gran-gran were Skyping," he announced.

"Just now?" Phillip asked.

Ant nodded.

"While you were in the same room?"

Ant nodded again. "Gran-gran is good at Skyping. And we had Jell-O, but Gran-gran has to take a nap now."

"That means we should go back to work," Phillip told him as he took his phone back.

Looking at him and Ant, Leon saw an antidote to all dark thoughts that crowded his mind. It felt good to know that such a little guy was in good hands. He had no doubt that Phillip would keep him safe.

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Once they got back, Ant had a good time at the office, but Phillip was preoccupied with what Leon had told him about his childhood. Leon's sorrow was different from his own. It was more insidious. Phillip hadn't known betrayal from the people he loved. His parents were kind and loving then they were gone. Tony... he couldn't really come to terms with how he left, how he lived or why he died. He only knew that Tony should have valued his life more and valued that child he would never meet.

Phillip wondered if that's what he was seeing in Leon – a man who valued something he never got to have, and he now gave Ant the care and attention that was denied to him. He could hear him in the outer office with Ant. He was letting Ant help him. Ant's favorite thing was to staple things. By the sound of it, a lot of things were getting stapled, a lot more than could possibly need stapling.

Phillip was amazed that Leon could be so cheerful and easygoing considering what he went through. Phillip admired him for it. He was thinking of inviting him to dinner again when he heard him telling Ant about his dinner plans.

"First, I'm going to meet my friend Pavel for pizza. Pavel loves pizza."

"Me too," Ant said.

"Then we're going to meet Lenny and Mike for drinks so we can listen to them argue."

"Make them up," Ant told him.

"Huh?"

"So they don't fight," Ant said.

"Make them make up? I'll try but with Lenny and Mike, it's usually better to duck and cover."

"A duck?" Ant said just as a call came in and Leon answered it.

Phillip was sorry to hear that Leon had plans. Possibly he was even jealous of his "friend" Pavel. He pictured some strapping, blond Russian and gritted his teeth together. But for all he knew friend meant friend just as assistant meant off limits, keep your hands off and stop being jealous that the man has a social life.

Phillip had his hands full anyway. That small boy with his love and worry for his Gran-gran was now Phillip's whole world, his whole heart. His last few years of existence before Ant seemed to him like some dim, murky thing, like waking up from a dream he couldn't quite remember.

He was awake now and filled with anxiety for this small child and everyone dear to him. That's why he was relieved that Lilly agreed to move to a nursing home, though maybe not the right one. And with her friend there, the adjustment would be easier for her. Plus Ant would be visiting often. Phillip planned to take him every day if he could manage it. He didn't want Ant to get lonely for his Gran-gran or vice versa.

But for now all he needed to do was take the little guy home and feed him. As they went down in the elevator, Phillip started to make dinner plans.

"Is there anything special you would like for dinner tonight?" Phillip asked him.

"Macaroni and cheese," Ant said right away.

That was hardly a balanced diet, but Phillip wasn't sure how to entice him away from macaroni and cheese to something healthier. Then he had an idea. "Let's stop at the store and see what catches our eye." When they got to the car and he buckled him into his car seat, Phillip told Ant, "You know there are foods other than macaroni and cheese."

"I know." To prove it, Ant named one, "Fries."

"Yes, and a few others."

As Phillip got behind the wheel he couldn't believe how much he wished that Leon was joining them. He should have never given himself a taste of his company. Now Leon's voice was in his ears, but some other man would be hearing it tonight.

Maybe that man would be able to make him laugh. While they were having dinner, he might reach under the table and squeeze Leon's thigh, the same lean, muscular thigh Phillip found so enticing whenever Leon sat next to him during a drive.

The difference was that the other man could reach for Leon freely. He was allowed, and Phillip wasn't. He couldn't brush his fingers over the stubble at Leon's jaw line then lean in for a kiss. Phillip could only imagine what Leon's kiss tasted like and desperately yearn to taste him for himself.

Chapter 15

As he got ready to go out, Leon felt off balance. The feeling stayed with him as he took off his suit and jumped in the shower. Instead of going out, he would have rather crawled under the covers. As he pulled on his casual clothes, he looked at his reflection in the mirror as if to ask, "What's bothering you, buddy?"

Thinking back, he knew what it was. Earlier that day, Leon had spoken about his childhood. He hadn't done that since he had been roommates with Pavel and he needed to explain his nightmares to him. Even then he hadn't said as much as he told Phillip today.

Years ago Leon realized that it wasn't something he needed to be ashamed of. The shame was on the men who abused him. Still he was surprised at himself for being such a blabbermouth about his childhood and to his boss no less. But Phillip was easy to open up to, the kind of guy you know you can trust. That's why Leon's mind went back to his childhood. Thinking of Ant and Phillip he compared them to his own younger self and all the people he couldn't trust.

Phillip was the perfect guy in his eyes – gorgeous but unwavering, principled, sexy, and upstanding. Damn, his admiration for his boss was getting way out of hand. Not to mention that it was all over the place – body and soul. But Phillip was just that kind of guy. Physically and in every other way, he was the dream that was born in Leon's heart, molded out of his childhood longing for security. In later years, his desires shaped the ideal man's body, but the heart of his ideal man stayed the same.

That's why today wasn't just about sharing some bad memories. Telling Phillip about himself, he was saying, "Know me, understand me, accept me." Only he was saying it to a man he hardly knew and his boss on top of that.

He couldn't just ignore Phillip's appeal. Everything that was missing from Leon's years growing up highlighted what mattered. A hot body was an empty fantasy. Sex was a minefield Leon could barely navigate without triggering nasty flashbacks. He wanted someone he could reach out to in the dark, someone who would take his hand, and then Leon would know without a doubt that he was safe and loved.

With crazy stuff like that swirling in his mind, it was a good thing Leon was going out tonight. A dose of Pavel and his pizza obsession, followed by listening to Lenny and Mike bicker lovingly – that was just the thing. God forbid he had been stuck at home flipping channels and brooding over his miserable childhood and how Phillip was just the man to fix it all.

While putting on his shoes, Leon smiled thinking of Ant and Phillip puttering around that bipolar apartment of Phillip's. He could just see Ant's big, blue eyes staring up at his new uncle with curiosity and wonder. It made Leon happy to think of them together and to know that Ant had someone like

Phillip to care for him and watch over him. If he kept that thought in mind, maybe he could actually enjoy tonight.

It was Pavel's goal to try out every single pizza joint in Easton. With new places always popping up, it was a never-ending quest. Tonight it was Bobby Q's.

"It was a wood fired pizza. What more do you want?" Leon asked him as they left the restaurant. Pavel had grumbled over every mouthful.

"When a place boasts about wood fired and hand tossed, expectations are high," Pavel told him.

Leon would swear that he enjoyed finding fault with a pizza more than eating it, but he was used to him. While Leon drove, Pavel posted his latest pizza rant on his Pizza Assassin blog. They were on their way to Swan Dive to meet Mike and Lenny.

Leon had known them since he was an eighteen-year-old newly arrived in Easton, in desperate need of a job and a place to stay. While eating lunch at a restaurant where Leon was looking for a job, they had overheard him begging for any kind of work. They called him over, bickered, took him under their wing, and then they bickered some more. Lenny gave him a job while Mike found him a place to live with Pavel as his roommate. Now they were more than his benefactors. They were his friends.

The two of them had already grabbed a table and were arguing when Leon and Pavel arrived.

"I was doomed since the moment I was born. To pay me back for the agonizing hours of labor, my mother named me Leonard. Leonard!" Lenny was saying as they took their seats.

"What's this about?" Leon asked.

"Mike was saying it's not too late for me to pretend to be cool," Lenny said and eyed his husband accusingly. "It's too late. It's way too late."

"Is this about the way you dressed?" Pavel said and looked him up and down.

"You want a piece of me?" Lenny asked and leaning across the table threateningly.

Pavel didn't take him up on it. "Maybe after I've had a few. I'm so full of fire-singed pizza, I can hardly move."

Since no one wanted to risk Pavel going on and on about pizza, Lenny and Mike shifted the focus to Leon.

"I remember hearing that your new job came with a perk. A good-looking boss, right? How is that going?"

Over drinks and a Coke for Leon, he told them what he had been up to. He finished off with how he helped out with Ant when he was at the office, and that gave them pause.

"So he had you babysitting. That's not exactly in your job description," Mike

said with a raised eyebrow. He and Lenny were used to looking out for him and worried if they thought anyone might be taking advantage of him.

"I don't mind." Leon didn't spend time with Ant because he thought it was his job.

"Aha," Lenny said and narrowed his eyes suspiciously. "How good looking is this boss of yours?"

"Very. Too bad he's the kind of guy who would never go after someone who works for him. He's all scruples and propriety, and a rock hard body under a conservative suit," Leon told them.

"As I listen to you describe him, I feel like I should be fanning myself with a coaster," Lenny said.

Leon confirmed it. "Oh, you definitely should be fanning yourself. But he isn't just a hot body in a suit. He's a really great guy. You should see him with his little nephew. It's like he handed that kid his whole heart to carry around in his pocket."

"Listen to you. You are ready to marry the guy," Mike accused him.

"Me? If I got into a relationship, I would need training wheels and an instruction manual."

"Haven't the two of us taught you everything you need to know about relationships?" Mike asked.

"How to fight about napkins?" Leon said. While they were talking, he had seen Lenny start to shred his napkin. Then Mike took it away from him. Lenny tried to grab it back. There was a short, silent scuffle that might have involved some kicking under the table. Mike won, but Lenny was already eying Pavel's napkin.

"We don't just fight about napkins. We fight about a lot more stuff," Mike claimed.

"I'll make a note of that," Leon said. "But I think it's pretty hopeless with Phillip."

"First name basis, that doesn't sound hopeless," Pavel told him then he raised his beer mug to him. "Here's to you bagging your boss."

Chapter 16

On the day Lilly was being discharged from the hospital, Phillip went with Ant to pick her up. When they arrived she was ready and waiting in her hospital room. Ant was happy to see her dressed and out of bed. As they waited for the orderly with the wheelchair to come and wheel her out, Lilly wanted to tell Ant what was going to happen.

She sat on the edge of her hospital bed and spoke to Ant. "Today you'll come home with me just for a little while. Then you'll be going to live with your Uncle Phillip."

"And Gran-gran," Ant added automatically. It was unthinkable to him that he was going to be separated from Lilly. He had spent his whole childhood with her, his whole little life so far.

Lilly shook her head to let him know that wasn't going to happen.

"I would still like that as well," Phillip told her, echoing Ant's wishes. "If you would like to move in...."

She shook her head again and thanked Phillip for his offer then spoke to Ant. "You know Bernie is over there at Morning Glen. She's real lonely there all by herself."

"Poor Bernie," Ant said and made a sad face.

"She won't be lonely if I go to live there too. And you'll be with your Uncle Phillip, so none of us will be alone. See how nice it all works out."

Ant didn't look happy about her neat solution.

"You'll come to see me all the time. Right?" she said, looking up at Phillip.

"All the time," Phillip confirmed. He told Ant, "We'll bring your Gran-gran lots of presents when we visit."

Ant's face brightened at Phillip's words, but Lilly cautioned him. "Not too many presents. You don't want to spoil me."

Phillip wanted to sweeten the deal for Ant though. "What do you say, Ant, should we spoil your Gran-gran and get her lots of presents?"

"Yes, lots and lots," Ant said with a mischievous smile and hugged Lilly.

It wasn't easy to leave Ant in Lilly's care again though she was doing much better now and seemed more able to take care of him and herself. Phillip had already gotten hopelessly attached and used to having Ant around. He was worried that Lilly would change her mind.

Seeing his anxiety, she made it clear that having Ant with her was temporary. The stay in the hospital and change of medication had made noticeable improvements, she was steadier on her feet and her color was better, but her decision to go into a nursing home was firm. Since Phillip still had misgivings about Morning Glen, he arranged to take Ant and Lilly to visit her friend early the next morning.

Phillip couldn't believe how much anxiety he felt on Ant's behalf. He worried about Lilly like he would about a member of his own family.

Realizing how his family had grown in such a short time, Phillip took a deep breath. It was both frightening and wonderful, and it made him determined to take good care of both Ant and his Gran-gran.

The next day, on the way to the nursing home, they stopped to buy some treats for Bernie. Lilly tried to talk him out of the shopping trip, but Phillip told her he couldn't visit Bernie empty handed. When they arrived at Morning Glen, Ant helped carry the basket of tangerines he had chosen for Lilly's friend.

As they crossed the parking lot, neither the grounds nor the exterior of the building eased Phillip's worries. The building looked shabby and depressing while the grounds were bare and neglected. Ant was excited about their outing and ready to run ahead, but Phillip didn't like what he saw as they went inside the main building.

The cleanliness of the place was not up to his standards. The smell was horrible. He saw residents sitting in a stupor, left unattended in hallways, not looking too clean and definitely unhappy. It was unthinkable for Lilly to stay in a place like this, but for now Phillip didn't say anything.

They made their way through a long corridor to the back patio where Bernie was waiting. The whole time, Phillip saw only two staff members, and they looked so harried he wouldn't have dreamed of stopping either one of them to ask questions.

Going out onto the patio, Phillip saw rows of residents, some in plastic chairs, some in wheelchairs, all of them looking downcast. There was no member of staff in sight. While Phillip stared around uncertainly, Ant spotted Lilly's friend right away.

"Hi, Bernie!" Ant shouted as he ran up to a white-haired lady in a wheelchair. She was dressed in a flowery housedress and slippers. Her hair was short and wavy but not combed. Phillip noticed a large, ugly bruise under her knee. Her face drooped slightly on one side.

She pit out one arm while the other one stayed motionless in her lap. Ant ran to her for a one armed hug, and Phillip set down the basket of tangerines on a table.

"And who's this that you've brought to visit me?" she said as she looked up at Phillip.

"It's my Uncle Phillip! He's new," Ant told her and smiled up at him.

"Is he?" Bernie offered him her right hand. "I'm Bernie, and as you can see I'm only half the woman I used to be," she said.

"You aren't so bad," Lilly told her just as Phillip saw an empty plastic chair and brought it over for her.

"Bernie is a good egg," Ant said.

"A little cracked but still good on the inside," Bernie said like it was something she often repeated. "You don't look so terrible," she said to Lilly as she looked her over.

"It was all a big scare more than anything," Lilly claimed while Bernie seemed skeptical.

Ant agreed. "It was scary. Gran-gran went boop! And she didn't get up."

"You know my motto, Lill – sit down before you fall down." Bernie patted the arm of her wheelchair with her good hand.

"That's why I'll be moving here," Lilly told her.

Ant made a sad face, and Phillip wasn't happy about it either. What he had seen of the place had not given him a good impression. "Would you recommend this place to Lilly?" Phillip asked Bernie.

Lilly sighed like she knew what kind of answer to expect.

Bernie made a pained face. "It's no palace, but where are folks like us supposed to go?"

"I told you I want to be here with Bernie," Lilly told Phillip.

Bernie beamed at her.

"Can we talk about this while Ant and Bernie spend some time together?" Phillip asked Lilly. He just couldn't let her move in here.

As they walked away, Phillip could hear Ant as he told Bernie about the fish and his room at Phillip's. Then he turned to Lilly.

"This place won't work. I'm sorry. I know I'm overstepping. But this place just isn't good enough for Ant's great-great aunt. How about if I pay for both you and Bernice to move somewhere nicer? You two can have a small house of your own. I would hire a health aid and a housekeeper."

Lilly frowned at him. "I couldn't let you spend that kind of money. Here is fine. I can still manage for myself and help out Bernie too."

"What if I pay for both you and Bernie to move to Ivy Gate Senior Residences. It has an excellent reputation," Phillip said.

Lilly tried to refuse this offer too. "That's for folks with money."

Not willing to risk another no, Phillip decided to pull out all the stops. "It's only a short drive from Easton. I can bring Ant to visit you a lot more often than if you moved here. Please, do this for him. I'm not some stranger. I'm Ant's uncle and that makes me family. There is no reason not to accept my help. And think of Bernie. She would be much better off too. At Ivy Gate, she could get therapy and regain at least some of her mobility. Wouldn't that be worth sacrificing a little bit of your pride?"

Phillip could see how conflicted she was. She obviously wasn't a woman who put herself first, and that gave Phillip an advantage. If it was for Ant and for Bernie, she just might do it.

She did have one final objection. "Bernie will never go for it."

Now it was Bernie's turn to have a little private chat with Phillip. To give them time to talk, Lilly took Ant to get some snacks from the vending machine.

"I was hoping someone from your side of the family would come to look in

on little Ant. I was hoping it would be the child's daddy. Lilly told me about your loss. I'm real sorry about your brother," Bernie said to Phillip.

Phillip nodded. "Thank you."

"Him and that Joan, I guess they burned the candle at both ends," she said.

"They left us Ant," Phillip said.

"The finest thing Joan ever did. She gave Lilly so much worry and heartache, but at least when she passed, Lilly had that boy to console her. He is a curly headed little blessing."

"Yes, and for his sake and Lilly's, I hope you will accept my offer." Phillip told her what he had in mind.

"That just wouldn't be right," she said.

Phillip used the same gambit on her that he used on Lilly. "Does it seem right to stay here? Or to have Lilly move here? Lilly will only go to Ivy Gate if you will. If she's over there, I can bring Ant to visit all the time. She won't be able to see Ant nearly as often if she moves here. You know how much she is going to miss him."

"You trying to take an old lady on a guilt trip?" she asked.

Since she saw through him, Phillip admitted it right away, "Yes, ma'am, and I hope it's working."

Chapter 17

Phillip arrived at the office very late. Instead of a more formal greeting, Leon had a question.

"No Ant?" Leon asked and craned his neck as if he thought Ant might be hiding behind Phillip.

"He's with Lilly for a few days." Phillip told him as he lingered near Leon's desk. From there, he could see his frown up close. He also noticed the shades of gold and light brown in his hair and in his hazel eyes, as well as the stubble that accentuated his jaw line. But most of all, he saw the look of accusation that he aimed at Phillip for not bringing Ant along.

Looking around, he could see why Leon would feel so let down. Ant lit up the whole place with his presence. Without him, the office returned to its usual gloom. He remembered Ken seeing it for the first time and telling him, "It has a Phillip quality. My late grandfather would feel right at home here, but not anyone living."

Leon stared at Phillip and his expression changed to one of concern. "I can see I'm not the only one who misses Ant. You don't look chipper either. Is everything OK? Ant is still going to live with you, right?"

"Everything is fine," Phillip assured him. "Ant is coming to live with me. I just had to do some hard negotiating. I was hoping Lilly would move in with me along with Ant, or maybe let me move her into her own place, but at least I managed to persuade her and her friend, Bernie, to move to Ivy Gate."

"Her friend too?"

"Lilly wouldn't go without her. She was so determined to be with her friend. It was really touching," Phillip told him.

"I see. What's sweeter than two old ladies who love each other?"

Phillip smiled. Walking into his office, he wondered if Leon might have a romantic streak. He was probably reading too much into it. Whenever he was around him, Phillip certainly did.

Phillip got a different reaction when he told Ken his plans for Lilly. He had picked up Ant and gone over to Ken's apartment Saturday morning. It was past time that his best friend met his nephew.

Ken's apartment made a good first impression on Ant. There was a fun, 70s style vibe mixed with exotic fabrics and comic book art on the walls. Ant stared all around and up at the light fixtures that were more like pieces of modern art.

When Phillip presented Ant to him, Ken leaned down and peered at him closely. "I can definitely see it," Ken said. He was noticing the same resemblance Phillip had seen, though Ken only knew Tony from pictures.

Ant wasn't sure what to think about all this intense scrutiny.

"This is Ken," Phillip told him.

"Best friend Ken," Ant said and made Ken smile.

"Yes. And he's saying that you look like your dad," Phillip explained.

"Me?" Ant looked surprised and proud. As they went to sit down in Ken's eclectically decorated living room, he asked, "Do you have fishes?"

"Everyone doesn't have fishes," Ken told him peevishly.

Ant was very disappointed that he didn't, and Phillip felt like maybe his apartment won out after all. Still he wanted to give credit where it was due. "Ken is the one who named Bee and Ruby."

Now Ant looked at him with approval. "You're good at naming."

"I am. You want me to name you?" Ken offered.

"I have a name," Ant told him.

"And it's a very nice one," Phillip said.

"Look at you doting," Ken said with a shake of his head.

"What's doting?" Ant asked.

"It means that I'm very happy to be your uncle," Phillip told him.

"Me too," Ant told him then smiled shyly.

"Stop that," Ken told them. "You'll give me diabetes."

Phillip didn't bother explaining that to Ant. Explaining Ken even to an adult would take all day.

To give him a chance to talk to Phillip, Ken showed Ant a video game he could play on his old laptop. He and Phillip then went off to Ken's den. They sat in uncomfortable, old leather office chairs. Ken leaned back and rested his elbow on his reclaimed wood desk with mismatched, antique hardware.

"I use that game to keep the nieces out of my hair so Nancy can grill me about my love life uninterrupted," Ken told him. "And speaking of kids ruining everything, that cherubic little child is going to ruin your already nonexistent love life. It was already endangered, now it stands no chance of survival. With a kid in the picture, I'm just going to declare it extinct."

"I'm fine with that," Phillip lied.

Ken didn't believe him, but he moved on anyway. "Other than rotting on the vine, what else have you been up to?" he asked.

Phillip filled him in about Lilly, Bernie and most importantly Ant coming to live with him.

"Ugh, you went to a nursing home." Ken didn't hide his disgust. "I feel nauseous just thinking about it. It's great you found your brother's kid, but I don't see why you have to involve yourself with his great-aunt or whoever."

Phillip leaned back and stared Ken down for a minute. "Why I have to involve myself with the woman who raised Ant for the last three years, is that what you're asking me?"

Ken shrugged. "Fine, but isn't her nursing home her choice?"

"Not when I can pay for a better one?"

"For her and her friend? I think you're nuts. Being an uncle all of a sudden has scrambled your brain."

"Scrambled eggs?" Ant said, poking his head into the den.

"Are you hungry?" Phillip asked him.

When Ant nodded, Ken asked, "Aren't you feeding this kid?"

"Sometimes," Phillip told him then he turned to Ant. "Ken will make us some scrambled eggs."

"Now I'm cooking?" Ken griped, but then he got up and trudged off to the kitchen. Ant followed him and Phillip went along too.

Seeing how eagerly Ant watched Ken while he worked in the kitchen, Phillip picked him up so he could get a better view of the action. Ant was so small and light in his arms. It made Phillip feel an overwhelming protectiveness toward him. He just wanted to shield him from the whole world. At the same time he wanted to show him everything, give him the whole world or at least all the good things in it. But all Ant wanted was to watch Ken making scrambled eggs and then to eat them.

"Is this a cooking show now?" Ken said when he saw he had an audience.

"He's grouchy, not like Leon," Ant said. Phillip was a little surprised that he was comparing them. He thought that was something only he did.

"And who is Leon?" Ken asked, not pleased that he didn't come off well in comparison.

"He goes to work with Uncle Phillip and he buys us ice cream," Ant told him.

Ken looked confused.

"My assistant," Phillip said.

Ken amended that to "Your pretty assistant."

"Yes, him," Phillip confirmed while trying not to give away how he felt about him. Ken still looked at him suspiciously. "Don't burn those eggs," Phillip warned him to get his mind off Leon. But as soon as Ant said Leon's name, he knew it was hopeless. Ken could smell blood in the water. Phillip was never going to survive the inevitable interrogation.

While Ant ate, Phillip came up with the idea to use Ant as a shield. As soon as the dishes went into the dishwasher, he made Ken teach Ant some real card games.

Ken complained about that chore as well. Digging up a deck of cards, Ken shuffled them as he took a seat at the kitchen table. Ant sat across from him, looking attentive while kicking his feet under the table. Talking fast, Ken gave him the rules of poker one after another, and Ant nodded after every rule. At the end Ken asked him, "Did you get all that?"

Ant said, "No" and gave an emphatic shake of his head.

"Did you get any of it?" Ken wanted to know.

Ant said no again.

Ken turned to Phillip. "He's going to be so easy to beat. He's as hopeless at cards as his uncle."

"Unlucky at cards..." Phillip mumbled to himself.

"What was that?" Ken asked and squinted at him. He dealt the cards without

taking his eyes off Phillip.

"Did I win?" Ant asked showing them his cards.

"Yes," Phillip decided before Ken could speak.

Playing cards might have been his way of avoiding a questioning by Ken, but it only made him think about playing cards with Leon and Ant on that first day when he met him. It made him miss Leon's sure way with Ant, his confidence and the kindness and humor in his eyes. Hell, that was the last thing he needed to be thinking about with Ken giving him sideways glances while he smugly beat a three-year-old at poker.

After a few hands, Ken wanted to send Ant back to play that video game, but Phillip decided it was time to go. He didn't want Ant getting addicted to video games, and obviously Ken didn't have the same patience when it came to spending time with a kid that Leon did.

There he was comparing Ken to Leon again. Maybe it wasn't all that surprising that he compared them. Ken was the longest relationship of his life. Their romance was brief, but for all his faults and all of Phillip's, they stuck it out together after the attraction was gone. Phillip sometimes wondered how long Leon would stick around. Only as his assistant of course.

Chapter 18

The happy changes in Phillip's life took some getting used to. Having Ant living with him was a little disorienting. All the time he had to remind himself that it was real. After a mostly sleepless night, Phillip would catch a few hours of sleep at dawn. He woke up in the morning to the sound of Ant puttering around the apartment. No matter how early he set his alarm, it seemed impossible to wake up before a three-year-old.

Seeing his disheveled, curly-head and his big smile first thing made for cheerful mornings. But that didn't mean that getting Ant ready wasn't a struggle. That little boy was his father's son after all.

Lilly and Bernie were getting settled at Ivy Gate, and Phillip was able to bring Ant to visit them every day. Every time they went, Lilly and Bernie couldn't heap enough praise on the place, especially the staff and how kind and attentive they were. And they were overjoyed to see Ant of course.

At the same time Ant was settling in at Phillip's. Each night while he was working in his office, Phillip would hear the thumping of Ant's feet on the wood floors. Then the leather sofa in the office would creak as Ant curled up on it. The only difference now was that Ant dragged his pillow and his blanket along so Phillip didn't need to go and get them.

Phillip let him stay there a while, but once he saw that Ant was getting sleepy, he took him back to bed. He sat with him until he fell asleep. After that he continued to sit in that dark room with its colorful nightlight. He listened to Ant's soft breathing, amazed that he had that little guy in his life.

Now that Ant wasn't just visiting him but was living with him, Phillip was even more nervous about making everything right for him. At least his room was done, but there were all sorts of arrangements to make. Ant would be in preschool and also daycare. Phillip had already spoken to Lilly about that and offered to take her to visit the places that had openings and could accept Ant so late in the year. She declined and let Phillip make the decision.

Once he found the right place, Phillip told Ant about it. "You're going to go to preschool and after that you'll go to daycare."

Ant's eyes went wide. "Big kids go to school."

"Yes, you're going to be a big kid," Phillip told him.

His eyes went even wider.

"It's going to be fun. You'll get to meet lots of other kids and make friends," Phillip said.

"And draw pictures?" Ant asked. "Like T.J. He was a big kid and I played with him, but he moved. He made a drawing in school and his mom put it on the 'fridgerator."

"You'll be making drawings too, and we'll put them on the fridge and anywhere else you like," Phillip promised him.

Ant was still a little nervous about preschool but excited too. He wasn't the only one who was apprehensive about preschool. Phillip didn't really want to give up spending time with Ant. He would miss him at the office, but he was sure Ant would benefit from being with other kids his age more than from a day at the office with his boring uncle.

The next day, to get Ant ready for preschool, Phillip was taking him shopping right after work. As he sat at his desk, he could hear Ant in the outer office telling Leon that he was going to preschool.

"You are going to have a blast. But don't forget us little people over here," Leon told him.

"Little? Who?" Ant asked.

"OK, big people. Me and your uncle."

"I won't forget you Leon. I'm gonna make a drawing for Uncle Phillip, and I'm gonna make you a drawing too," Ant said to reassure him.

"You're the best!" Leon told him just as Phillip came out, ready to take Ant shopping for school supplies.

"Can Leon come too?" Ant asked looking from Phillip to Leon eagerly.

"Maybe he has other things to do," Phillip said. He didn't think Leon would want the two of them to monopolize his evenings as well as his whole working day.

Ant answered for him. "Leon has to go shopping too. He has to buy a lettuce head."

"I showed Ant my shopping list. I was just going to stop at the big Target after work. They have food and school supplies," Leon said with a shrug, leaving it up to Phillip.

"OK. Then you can help Ant pick out a really cool backpack," Phillip said and smiled at Leon.

As Ant celebrated the fact that Leon was joining them, Phillip pictured that duct-taped backpack Ant had with him when he first saw him. Though he planned to get him a new one, he couldn't imagine ever getting rid of that old one. It was part of the moment when Phillip's life changed forever and his heart both broke and mended.

The old backpack was in Ant's room now, sitting on the floor of his closet. On the night he moved in, right before bed, Ant had showed Phillip the treasures he kept inside. It held an action figure with only one leg, a stuffed Ninja Turtle that had been torn and mended, a golf ball and two promotional key chains, a baseball cap that was too big for Ant and the coloring book he had finished on the day he met him.

"Your treasures are very nice," Phillip told him. "Do you know what my biggest treasure is?"

Ant thought hard about it and decided it was Bee and Ruby, his fish.

"No. It's you."

*

Leon told himself he was just going shopping. It happened to be with Phillip and Ant, but it didn't mean anything. Ant had invited him and Phillip went along with it. Now Phillip seemed far away. When the elevator doors closed, Leon reached past him to press the button for the parking garage then changed his mind and let Ant do the honors.

"You look a little spacey. You OK to drive?" Leon teased Phillip as they got out of the elevator in the parking garage and he just stood there instead of going to his car.

"I was just thinking about how little things make a huge difference in one's life."

They both looked at Ant, who was peering at a colorful bumper sticker on a nearby SUV.

"Let's go equip this kid. What do you need, an abacus, a slide rule, a compass?" Leon joked.

Ant shrugged. "I don't know. I've never been to school before. Uncle Phillip has a list."

"And it doesn't include any of that stuff. Crayons and colored pencils are on the list though," Phillip said knowing that would make Ant happy.

As they went into the store, Leon told Ant to lead the way. Ant looked all around then up at Phillip. He pointed out where the school supplies were. Ant nodded and took Leon's hand and marched him over there.

"Are you nervous about going to school?" Leon asked Ant.

Phillip beat him to it. Under his breath, he answered, "I know I am," and he looked it too. He didn't want to let Ant go off into the big, scary world of preschool.

Ant gave his own answer by scrunching up his face and making a small, unhappy noise.

"Nothing to be worried about," Leon reassured him. "You're going to learn loads of stuff and have a ton of fun. Promise. Now we high-five." Leon raised his hand too high and Ant jumped up. Leon met him more than half way and there was a tiny smack as Ant's little hand hit Leon's big one. "See how good you are at high-fiving. You're going to be good at everything."

Once they were in the school supplies aisle, Ant was entranced by so many different colored pencils and boxes of crayons. He wasn't a kid who got a lot of stuff bought for him until now. Every little thing was a big deal to him. While Ant poked around, Phillip thanked Leon for what seemed like a hundredth time.

"I was going shopping anyway. Being with you guys just makes it more fun," Leon said with a shrug.

"You mean Ant makes it more fun."

"Don't correct me. I know how to say what I mean," Leon asserted and gave Phillip a significant look. Afraid to give away too much, Leon turned away quickly. He wasn't sure how far he could push his luck with him before Phillip shut him down. He made Leon so confused.

When he was with Phillip, he could almost believe that something wonderful was just about to begin. It simmered right under the surface. Leon could see it in Phillip's gray eyes.

Away from him, Leon was more sensible. Right now Phillip needed him. Leon was his crutch until he got used to being an uncle. Once he didn't need him, they would just be a boss and an employee on friendly terms, but nothing more.

But now was one of those times when he was with Phillip and he didn't care why they were together. All he cared about was that a warm feeling grew in his chest and spread everywhere. He felt a surge of excitement whenever their eyes met. Leon wanted to grab Phillip's face in his hands and ask him, "Do you know how good this feels – to be with you anywhere, doing anything?"

If he was brave, he might ask Phillip if he felt that way too. Leon might not even wait for his answer before he kissed him. If he was brave.

The truth was he could barely hold the man's gaze. He contented himself with enjoying what they had and hoping that they might grab something to eat together.

"I'm kind of hungry," Leon said to move things in the right direction. It was both a hint and the truth.

Phillip was nice enough to take the bait. "After you're finished with your shopping, we could stop by Regina's for something to eat," he suggested.

Leon was surprised by his choice. "Regina's doesn't seem like your kind of place."

"You are right. I've never been there, but I've heard good things about it. It seemed like a place Ant might like. And maybe you too."

Leon grinned but tried not to show how pleased he was. It was a small thing, but he felt like his heart was beating faster now.

"Hey, Ant. Did you hear that? We re going out to dinner," Leon said.

"Out for fries?" Ant asked looking excited.

Leon wondered if that was all he ever got to have when he ate out. On Lilly's budget, even an order of fries was a treat.

"You can have anything you want," Phillip told Ant. Leon could tell that he had guessed the same thing and wanted to indulge him. He had more love for that kid then he knew what to do with.

Since fries were on the menu, they got the shopping done fast. They picked up a few things for Lilly and Bernie as well. Those two ladies were never far from Ant's and Phillip's thoughts. Ant was already planning what he was going to draw for Bernie and his Gran-gran as he clutched the biggest box of

crayons they had. Leon felt like he was always seeing little signs of how much everyone in this whole newly minted family cared about each other.

Regina's big, messy sandwiches were a hit with Ant as were the tall chairs and tables. Ant ordered a ham and cheese melt but mostly stuffed his face with fries. Now the sandwich was in a takeout bag, and they were on their way to drop off Leon at his car.

Phillip got out and thanked Leon again. His gratitude was out of control.

"Didn't you just take me out to dinner? I'm supposed to be thanking you," Leon told him.

"It's because I know Ant wouldn't be having so much fun without you. And I bet you have better, more adult ways to spend your time," Phillip said.

"I wonder what you're implying," Leon said slyly.

"Nothing," Phillip said too quickly.

"I had a good time," Leon told him almost like it was the end of a date. He did for a second consider leaning in and kissing Phillip.

"I'll see you tomorrow," Phillip said and then they both just stood there, next to his car. Neither one of them wanted to be the first to go. They looked at each other then away. It was like some spell was keeping them in place, inches apart, not touching, not daring to look at each other but held together by some invisible force.

Finally Leon broke the spell. He said goodnight to Phillip, waved goodbye to Ant, and walked away with his heart fluttering in his chest, aching for something impossible and beautiful in the least romantic place imaginable – under the florescent lights surrounded by the gray cement of a parking garage.

Chapter 19

Having taken Ant to his first day of preschool, Phillip arrived at the office later than usual. That was going to be the norm for him from now on. Good thing Leon was there to take care of things.

The first thing Leon did when Phillip walked in was to furrow his brows and ask, "Where is the little guy?"

"You were there when we got the school supplies," Phillip reminded him. "He is at preschool and after that he'll be at daycare."

Leon slumped down behind his desk and took on a listless but still somewhat professional attitude. "Good morning, sir. Can I get you a coffee?"

"Not today. Thank you. I'll miss having Ant here too," Phillip admitted. "He was the life of the party."

Leon smiled. "How did it go?"

"Not too bad. Except that all morning long, I was so anxious I almost forgot to take pictures to show to Lilly."

"There are pictures," Leon said and stared at Phillip hard until he realized what he wanted.

"Would you like to see them?"

"Yes, please," Leon said. He got up from behind his desk as Phillip got out his phone and went over to him.

They both angled their heads toward each other to be able to see the screen. They were so close. Phillip could smell Leon's clean, crisp scent with an underlying masculine heat. It made him wonder about the taste of his skin. He would kill for just one lick along the edge of his jaw then the cords of his neck, but he wouldn't be able to stop there. Phillip would spend hours tangling his fingers through his hair, looking into his eyes, and making him come.

Phillip gritted his teeth and suppressed a shudder. The pictures on his phone were only a blur. Phillip hadn't anticipated how close they would be standing or what it would do to him. His whole awareness was consumed by the nearness of Leon, almost touching. The warmth of his body was within easy reach. Just another inch and he would feel him. Have him.

"He's going to be such a good little student. I bet you were the teachers pet," Leon said to Phillip teasingly.

Phillip gave him a weak smile, not trusting himself to say anything. If he opened his mouth, he couldn't guarantee that what came out wouldn't be an inappropriate confession of his feelings or, God forbid, a proposition.

Leon was having a stronger effect on him all the time. Phillip was unnerved by the force of his feelings. He wanted to throw the phone to Leon and run away.

Leon didn't seem to notice his weakened state as he looked at dozens of photos Phillip had taken of Ant. After nearly forgetting to take pictures, Phillip kind of got carried away. He wanted to preserve every second of Ant's first day of preschool.

"Look at that sweet face," Leon said as he looked at a photo of Ant standing proudly in front of the colorful facade of his preschool with his new backpack on his tiny shoulders. "He wasn't too nervous when you dropped him off, was he?" Leon asked with a concerned frown.

"I think excitement won over the nerves," Phillip said. Focusing on Ant helped steady him. It reminded him of everything Leon had done to help him. He deserved better for his kindness than to have his boss hitting on him.

"I shouldn't have looked at these. Now I miss him even more," Leon said. "I miss his chirpy little voice. And his laugh."

"It's better not to know what you're missing," Phillip said, thinking of the feelings Leon had stirred up in him.

"Oh. That wasn't about Ant. What are you missing?" Leon asked.

"Nothing you need to be concerned about," Phillip blurted out. Too late he realized how sharp his words sounded. He saw Leon freeze up. It was like a mask came down over his face. The warning in his voice was for himself, not Leon, but he didn't know that.

Leon stepped back from him looking chastised. Phillip regretted it immediately. Not knowing how to fix his blunder, Phillip started talking business to cover his embarrassment.

He hadn't really meant to rebuff him like that. It was a reflex. In a business setting, Phillip always acted cold and standoffish whenever any personal overtures were made toward him. But in this case, Phillip was the one who had invited Leon into his personal life. It was something he wouldn't have dreamed of with anyone else, especially an employee. This was his fault and he didn't know how to set it right.

For now, his retreat to a safer topic seemed to work. Leon's demeanor turned from hurt to neutral. Leon was now professional but with that easy, casual stance that was his trademark. Everything seemed all right now. So why did Phillip feel the ache of sharp regret at losing the little bit of closeness they shared. Phillip had the urge to grab Leon and tell him he was sorry, confess all his secrets, bare himself to him as he begged for his forgiveness.

Instead, Phillip finished giving Leon instructions. He saw Leon getting started on the work he had assigned him. As he went into his office, Phillip still felt conflicted and mad at himself. He couldn't just run away. Right at the door, he turned back.

"It's so much better having someone I can share things with. Thank you," he said to Leon.

Leon looked up, smiled at him and went back to work a little more cheerfully. And Phillip did too. Seeing a smile on Leon's face made him wonder what it would be like to share his life with someone who could fill his heart with joy with one simple gesture or a single look. He couldn't imagine it. Someone like Leon greeting him with a smile or a kiss every time he opened his eyes in the morning – was exactly what he had to stop fantasizing about. He was going to bury himself in work until it was time to pick up Ant from

daycare.

Why wasn't Leon an assistant with no appeal or just someone he met outside of work and could approach with no worries? A day at the office wasn't supposed to be such an emotional roller coaster, and Phillip had only been there a few minutes. How was he going to survive the rest of this day?

If only Ant was here to protect him from his worst impulses. To think that little Ant had such a huge impact on his life. He was his buffer but also an excuse for spending time with Leon. Being his uncle had turned Phillip inside out.

Was he even the same man any more? At one time reclusive, work obsessed, exacting and driven, he now found that work was an afterthought and warm, human connections were everything to him. Caught between his little nephew and his assistant, Phillip hardly recognized himself any more.

One thing hadn't changed though – once again Phillip was at his office at home, up late into the night. He was working while his thoughts vacillated between Ant and Leon. Sitting back, he stretched then decided to get himself some water.

Maybe if he could just make his mind stop, he could get some sleep. But that was hopeless. Lying in bed, in the dark, set off a whirlwind of fantasies about Leon. They were easier to keep under control when he wasn't half awake and at the mercy of his yearnings. And if he gave himself up to sleep, feverish dreams of Leon would take over where the fantasies left off.

In the kitchen, Phillip didn't bother to turn on the light, just opened the fridge. The glare from inside the fridge was harsh on his tired eyes. Just as he grabbed a bottle of water, he heard the familiar sound of tiny feet. With the bottle in hand, he headed back to his office where Ant would be looking for him.

Ant wasn't there, but the sound of small, running feet was just around the corner toward Phillip's bedroom. Turning the corner, Phillip found Ant standing at his open bedroom door and peering anxiously into his pitch-black bedroom.

"I'm not in there if you're looking for me," Phillip said and watched Ant jump with fright. "Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you."

Ant breathed quickly and looked anxious for a moment. Then he looked so happy and relieved to see Phillip. As he ran to him and took hold of his hand, Ant looked up and Phillip smiled at him.

"So you're awake again."

"I couldn't find you," Ant said with a note of reproach in his voice.

"Sorry. I was just getting a bottle of water from the kitchen."

"It was dark."

Seeing how he stayed close as he walked him back to his room, Phillip wondered about Ant coming into his office to sleep on the couch most nights. Phillip assumed that it was just because the place was new to him, but now he

saw that there might be something more to it. "Ant, are you scared of the dark?"

"I don't like it," Ant said.

Phillip put an arm around his tiny shoulders as they went to Ant's bedroom. He turned on the light in the hallway and the lamp in his room too.

"Why didn't you tell me you were scared of the dark?" Phillip asked him as they both sat down on Ant's dinosaur bed.

He gave a small shrug.

"You weren't scared at your Gran-gran's, were you?"

"I was scared sometimes, but the big light in the kitchen is on all the time and Gran-gran was right there. I could hear her snoring."

Phillip remembered that Ant shared a bedroom with her. He wasn't used to sleeping alone.

"Doesn't the astronaut nightlight help?" Phillip pointed out the astronaut with a big helmet that lit up.

"It's small."

"We can fix that. You can have a bigger light. OK?"

"But I like sleeping in the office. You go click click click." While making a funny face, Ant mimed typing and moving the mouse.

"You can come over to the office whenever you are scared, or you can call me and I'll come to you. But right now try sleeping here. I'll stay with you, and we'll leave this lamp on."

Phillip stood up and pulled back the covers so Ant could lie down. Once Ant was in bed and Phillip tucked the covers around him securely, he sat down again next to him.

"You can always talk to me if something is bothering you or if anything scares you," he told Ant.

"I'm not scared when you're here. You're big and strong."

Phillip smiled. He was glad he could ease Ant's fears so easily. Except now he didn't want to leave him even after he fell asleep. How could he leave this tiny boy all alone? He wanted to be there at every second of his life just in case. Taking a look around at his colorful and friendly, well-lit room, he decided to be sensible and go to bed.

*

Leon had a new routine these days. Cereal was still on the menu, coffee was still made with his eyes closed, but now Leon went to work the whole way repeating to himself that his boss was off limits. He knew that ever since the moment he met him, but parts of him refused to believe it.

It was easier to convince himself when Phillip wasn't around, when his eyes didn't melt into Leon's like he was offering him his soul. That was just in Leon's imagination. In reality Phillip wasn't offering him anything. He was just a kind, gorgeous guy and Leon just wanted to make up fairy tales about

him. Here is the knight in shining armor, the one he always dreamed about, the one who would save him.

Save him from what? Leon was OK now, not a helpless kid wondering who would hurt him next and how. But for some reason Phillip reached the places inside him where he hurt the most and promised to heal them.

When Phillip came into the office, Leon put on his best professional face while his heart beat like crazy. How could such a buttoned up guy do this to him?

It wasn't so bad though. Leon had it under control as long as Phillip didn't come over to stand next to his desk and look into his eyes too long.

But Phillip did just that – he stood, he stared, and he took Leon's breath away. After a long moment of silence while Leon's heart tried to jump out of his chest and his whole body heated, Phillip turned away.

At the last minute, when it looked like he was about to go into his office, a piece of mail from the stack Leon was sorting caught his eye. Phillip reached over and picked it up. Leon told himself not to breathe but he did. He caught the freshly showered scent coming off Phillip's skin and cursed himself for it. Now he did hold his breath wanting greedily to hold on to Phillip's scent more than he wanted to breathe.

Noticing Phillip hesitating instead of going in his office, Leon looked up at him to see if there was something he wanted.

"Something on your mind this morning?" Leon asked. It seemed like Phillip wanted to say something but was holding himself back.

"I feel like I'm always unburdening myself to you," Phillip said, furrowing his brows and sounding guilty.

"I don't mind. So what's the burden?"

After another short hesitation, Phillip decided to give it up. "Ant has been having trouble sleeping through the night, and I was ignoring the problem."

"With the move and all the changes, it isn't surprising. You think he hasn't been getting enough sleep?" Leon asked him. He could tell how bothered he was.

"He sleeps but he wakes up and comes to find me, usually in my office."

"Are you sure it's Ant who has trouble sleeping?" Leon asked archly.

"I don't sleep much especially since Tony died, and that's all the more reason I should have been aware that Ant was afraid of the dark. I separated him from Lilly, from everything he knows. I should have been more vigilant and realized it sooner." It was clear how bad he felt about it.

"Was he that scared?"

Phillip seemed to be looking for the right word. "I would say apprehensive. It didn't last. Once he saw I was there, he was OK."

"See, you're doing fine. Ant feels safe with you, so don't beat yourself up about it. The most important thing you can do is be there. I told you about my dad. When I was a scared little kid, I looked around and there was no one

there I could count on. Just by being there, on the spot, you are doing what Ant needs most."

"Thank you for saying that," Phillip said. "I'm going to get a big nightlight for his room. I've been leaving his lamp on at night but I'd like something less bright. Funny, these days it seems that I'm always shopping for something for Ant," Phillip said with a faint smile. He obviously didn't mind. "I'm even shopping for a new fish to add to the aquarium. But we need a long lived fish."

"Long lived?"

"I'm afraid that Bee or Ruby will croak on me, and I'll have a heartbroken boy on my hands. I want a fish that lives forever so Ant will never be sad." Judging by the look on his face, Phillip knew how crazy that was.

"Ah. One of those. OK. A fish that never dies. You are such a weirdo," Leon said then caught himself. "I mean, you're such a weirdo, sir."

Phillip only smiled. Leon didn't see any sign that he was offended. Remembering something he had seen in some ad, Leon did a quick search.

"This is it. Two birds with one stone." Leon showed him what he found online. "It's a big night light and also a fake aquarium."

Leaning over Leon shoulder to get a better look at the screen, Phillip pointed out the obvious. "Those fish aren't real."

"Isn't that what you asked for? Fish that never die."

Phillip laughed. "I guess I did."

"I admit it's kind of cheesy, but I bet Ant will like it as his big nightlight," Leon said then he thought about what this silly, oversized nightlight meant, how it showed Phillip's love and concern for Ant.

It was hard for him to imagine growing up with someone who cared so much. One word, one sign of fear from Ant and Phillip was working to make everything better. During his childhood, Leon had been unable to share his smallest or his worst fears with either of his parents. And it wasn't simply his own inability to speak up for himself. He had received some sort of silent signal from them that told him "we don't want to know".

No wonder he was so taken with Phillip. On the surface he was closed off, but really, he was so ready to give of himself.

Standing by his desk, Phillip noticed his thoughtful, faraway look.

"Were you afraid of the dark?" Phillip asked, but the concerned look in his eyes told Leon that he knew the answer.

"Fear was kind of a constant for me. It was worse at night though. But my fear was based on reality. There were bad things in the dark that would hurt me and a nightlight wouldn't have fixed anything. Unlike me, Ant will learn that he has nothing to be afraid of."

"I'm sorry," Phillip told him.

"I'm just glad Ant has you. Whenever he's scared, one look at you, and he knows everything is right in his little world."

"I wish someone had been there to do that for you," Phillip said.

Leon smiled wryly. "I think I'm still waiting for that someone. Maybe all damaged people do – wait all their lives for the person who will set their world right."

"You'll find him," Phillip said his voice harsh in its certainty.

"I will?" Leon looked at him with surprise. "I was kind of thinking it was up to me to set my own world right."

Phillip blinked, looking kind of flustered. Then he agreed with Leon. "That too. I just meant that you deserve... You deserve everything good. To be happy and never to be hurt again." Phillip seemed on the verge of listing more wishes and hopes he had for Leon but stopped himself.

"You're a good guy," Leon told him. His throat was tight and his words came out low and strangled. He was touched by what Phillip said and even more by the way he said it. It was like whatever he felt and was holding back was unrestrained for a moment and it spilled out. Leon could imagine what it would feel like to be held in Phillip's arms, to be kept safe and warm all night. It was a heady sensation more seductive than any sex dream, and he had sweated and moaned to many of them about Phillip. How was Leon supposed to keep his wits about him now?

Chapter 20

Though the big aquarium nightlight helped, Ant still came over to sleep on the sofa in Phillip's office every now and then. Phillip didn't really mind. He missed Ant every day when he was at work and Ant was in preschool and daycare.

For his part, Ant looked forward to every day at school. He was doing well and getting along with the other kids. But one day when Phillip picked him up from daycare, Ant seemed down. He had been cheerful and excited when he picked him up from preschool. Now he was gloomy.

As he buckled Ant into his astronaut seat, as he called his car seat, Phillip asked him what was the matter.

"The other kids don't like me," Ant said with his chin down and his face crinkled.

"Why do you say that?"

"Rita and Lou said they don't wanna play with me 'cause I don't know anything, and Jimmy called me a dummy."

"You're not. You're a smarty," Phillip told him.

Ant looked at him questioningly.

"Yeah. You're my smarty," Phillip assured him. "You know what, do you want to come with me to my office tomorrow after preschool?"

Ant nodded and cheered up right away. Though Phillip smiled at him, he was angry on Ant's behalf. He wasn't going to let him go back to daycare until he made sure it was the right place for him. He wouldn't tolerate anyone making Ant feel bad.

The next day, Leon was thrilled to see Ant arrive at the office. He gave Phillip a big grin as Ant ran over to his desk bubbling over with news from his day at preschool. It was hard to follow his stories, but Leon didn't mind the stream of happy nonsense. Watching Ant with Leon, Phillip saw how cheerful and excited he was, nothing like the day before.

The more he saw of Ant and Leon together, the more Phillip found himself thinking that's how it should be. He tried to shake off such an odd thought but the appeal of the scene was too strong. He only snapped out of his daydream when he heard Ant telling Leon about visiting Lilly and how they were going to have dinner at the nursing home with her and Bernie. Phillip wanted to take them out for dinner, but Bernie was still self-conscious about the effects of the stroke. She was getting better all the time though.

Thinking of her and Lilly, Phillip got out his phone, and had Ant call his Gran-gran. Ant found her picture and clicked to make the call. He got a proud look on his little face whenever he got to do things like that for himself. While he chatted with Lilly, Phillip had a chance to conduct some business with Leon. He had a few things for him to look over and sign.

"It sounds like you go over to visit Lilly practically every day," Leon said.

"Almost. That's one of the perks of Ivy Gate. I take Ant as often as I can. I don't want him to miss Lilly too much, and she loves seeing him. We have dinner over there at least once a week."

"And the food?" Leon said with a raised eyebrow.

"It's not too bad," Phillip said, but the look on his face gave away his real opinion so he admitted the truth. "The food is cooked and seasoned so as not to challenge the elderly digestive system. But Ant likes it OK."

Leon looked at him with amazement. "You are a saint."

"Hardly," Phillip said. At that moment he wasn't feeling saintly at all. He was thinking about how much he would rather have dinner with Leon and then have him for dessert right after. He wished his brain would remember that Leon was an employee and that meant he had to give up yet another beautiful daydream.

Leon didn't make that easy. His demeanor was so friendly and casual, it seduced Phillip into careless thoughts. Every time Phillip tried to strengthen his defenses, there would be a close moment or a look that unraveled it all.

As they passed papers back and forth over Leon's desk, Leon's knuckles grazed the back of his hand. That brief touch electrified Phillip's whole body. He stood stock-still, afraid that a complete breakdown in his self-control would follow. The moment was frozen with only the sound of his blood rushing and his heart beating too fast filling his ears. Then Leon's voice broke through.

"You have to get ready for that meeting," Leon reminded him. "Should I watch Ant?"

"Babysitting isn't in your job description," Phillip said after he blinked at Leon a few times stupidly.

"No, but it's Ant and it's fun," Leon said just as Ant was bringing Phillip's phone to him.

"Gran-gran and Bernie say hi. I told 'em I was at work with you and Leon, and Bernie said to ask for a raisin," Ant said, leaving Phillip a little puzzled.

"One raisin?" Leon said then he leaned down to squint at Ant. "Did she maybe tell you to ask for a raise?"

"That's how she said it," Ant confirmed, but he still believed she was talking about raisins.

"Your uncle is going to a meeting later. Maybe he can get you a raisin or even a whole box of them," Leon said to Ant. "Chocolate covered," he whispered to Phillip.

"I'll see what I can do," Phillip said with a smile.

"Your uncle has homework to do, and you get to stay out here with me," Leon informed Ant.

He cleared a space on his desk and put Ant there. As usual, Ant kicked his feet and his heels thumped against the side of the desk.

"Today you are an assistant to an assistant, and that's a very important job.

Later we'll raid my candy stash. Maybe we'll even give some to your uncle," Leon said and sat down behind his desk.

Leaving them alone, Phillip went to his office. As he worked, Ant's laugh and his high-pitched voice were interlaid with Leon's deeper voice which sometimes turned crisp and serious when he spoke on the phone. Every time after he finished speaking on the phone, Ant would clap like Leon had put on a performance for him.

A little later Leon invited Ant to sit with him on the carpet. Through the open door, Phillip watched as Leon folded up his legs under him. His eyes lingered on them. He had never met anyone whose physique enticed him so much. If Phillip closed his eyes and let his hands trace an outline of the body they most wanted to touch, it would be Leon's. Still, he couldn't have been comfortable sitting like that in his suit.

As Phillip tried not to stare at Leon, he and Ant started some sort of game that involved making their own playing cards. He wasn't sure what kind of game the two of them were playing, but Leon seemed to be taking the game just as seriously as Ant did. Somehow Ant still won.

"You helped me win," Ant protested, catching on that his non-stop winning streak against Leon wasn't natural.

"Well sure. We're best buds, aren't we?" Leon said.

Overjoyed to hear it, Ant nodded. He was such a happy boy when he was with Leon.

When it was time for Phillip to go to his meeting, Leon told him not to worry about anything. "Me and Ant can handle things here."

Ant agreed then he ran over to Phillip just as he was about to leave. He stopped right in front of him like he wasn't sure what to do next. Phillip got down on one knee and lightly put his arms around Ant's tiny form.

"I'll be back soon, and if you need me, Leon can call me any time," Phillip told him.

Ant said, "OK" then threw himself around Phillip's neck in a tight hug. Ant's arms felt small but strong, and Phillip's heart melted.

As Ant let him go and he got up, Phillip had to fight back tears. "Take good care of him," he said to Leon.

"I will!" Ant said.

"I am in good hands," Leon assured Phillip with a smile. "We'll take care of each other."

To Phillip it sounded like he was included as well, and he realized that Leon always made him feel taken care of. In the glow of that moment, Phillip found it hard to wrench himself away and leave. He just wanted to stay with those two. That was his vision of an ideal life.

Knowing he had business to conduct, he gritted his teeth and left. The meeting was just down the street so he decided not to bother with the car. Maybe the walk in the fresh air and spending a few hours trying to sort out a

new client would help him face reality and stop fantasizing about making a happy little family with his assistant.

As he stepped outside, Phillip was hit by a burst of bright sunshine. Full of vibrant green foliage, the treetops rustled with a soft, cheerful sound nothing like that death rattle of dry leaves that accompanied his walks all winter. Wasn't that just yesterday? The first days of spring were lost to him, wrapped in a haze of grief. News of Tony's death had darkened his whole world.

Now maybe his own personal winter was ending, and his vision had cleared. In the midst of the bustle of the busy street, Phillip's eyes were drawn to all the signs of late spring – the bright green leaves, buds and flowers in full bloom. It was like a promise of something even better to come.

Phillip got back from his meeting just in time to let Leon go home on time. As Ant was getting his stuff together, Phillip talked to Leon about what happened at daycare.

"Maybe I'm overreacting, but I can't stand to see an unhappy look on his little face."

Leon didn't object though. "If it means Ant gets to brighten up this gloomy office – no offence – I'm cool with whatever you do. But seriously, trust your instincts. If you think that daycare place isn't right for Ant, that's good enough. Being overprotective isn't the worst thing. I was pushed around at school from grade one. Since I didn't know anything else, I thought it was perfectly normal. Eventually I buried myself in books to escape everything at home and at school. Too bad being caught reading is as good a reason as any to get your ass kicked where I come from." Leon made light of it, but Phillip was very disturbed by what he heard.

"I'm sorry to hear that."

Leon dismissed his concern though. "Don't worry about me. It's all in the past. Just know that you're doing the right thing for Ant. I learned to let nasty words and deeds from other kids roll off my back. I had no other choice, but I wouldn't want that for Ant. He has so much goodness inside him. I don't want to see anything chip away at that."

"Nothing that happened to you has taken away from who you are. You've been wonderful to Ant and me," Phillip told Leon earnestly.

"I just follow my instincts," Leon said with a shrug. "Ant is a tiny gem of a human being and you're a great guy. If you're a little overprotective of a vulnerable little kid who has had a lot of changes and loss in his life, that's fine."

"I'm not used to it. Being ruled by my emotions like this is new to me. I don't usually have to work on being even-tempered," Phillip admitted and looked over at Ant who was supposed to be putting things in his book bag but had actually spread them out more than before.

"That's what love does to you I guess," Leon said.

Phillip turned to him, but Leon wouldn't meet his gaze. Hearing the word

love come out of his mouth, Phillip held his breath for a while. There he was overreacting again. It was just a word, but when Leon said it, Phillip wanted to latch onto it like it was a promise or an offer. Where was Ken now that Phillip needed a verbal slapping around?

Philip went over and reminded Ant what he was supposed to be doing. Turning up his angelic face, Ant gave him an innocent grin. That child needed to work on his organizational skills.

"Thank you so much for looking after him," Phillip said as he went back to Leon.

"You're welcome, but a word of warning, I better not see any extra money because of it." Leon gave him a very serious look.

"I have to compensate you for the extra work," Phillip insisted.

"What extra work? Playing with Ant? No. I'm putting my foot down about this," Leon said, getting tough with him.

"I think that's my line," Phillip said but it got him nowhere. Leon was adamant. He was too good to Ant and to Phillip. It was no wonder Ant liked him so much and Phillip was won over by him more every day. When Leon was around, Phillip didn't feel that crushing anxiety that maybe he couldn't do right by Ant.

He also felt a number of unwholesome feelings when he was with Leon. Leon's inescapable charms made it difficult, but Phillip had to focus on the gratitude he felt. That meant not giving in to any urges to touch or kiss Leon or to lean in and tell him what he felt for him. How long could he hold back, he wondered. His feelings for Leon were growing stronger all the time. How much longer before they overwhelmed him and made him do something crazy?

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Driving home, Leon tried to decide if he wanted to stop somewhere and grab dinner or throw something together at home. At the same time he tried not to think about Phillip. Nothing could keep his mind off that man though. With those broad shoulders and those sad eyes working against him, Leon didn't stand a chance.

Sometimes it seemed so possible, like something was really going to happen between them. Filled with a delicious, prickly tension, a moment would stretch out and Leon felt like he would simply fall into Phillip's arms and then just live there. Then in the next moment, the tension was broken as Phillip retreated into his shell. As he turned businesslike again, Leon was left to wonder if it was all on his side and Phillip was just being nice.

It didn't matter though. Hopeless or not, Leon wasn't equipped to take him on. Every time he went out to have fun, to meet someone, his past stalked him. The terrors of his childhood lurked in corners and hid in shadows. No matter how hot the guy was or how nice he seemed, being alone with him and

feeling his touch always brought back the worst of his memories. Like flipping a switch, an intimate moment turned into a waking nightmare. Leon pushed the guy away, stammered an apology and ran.

He couldn't do that to Phillip. He couldn't go after him and then fail him in the end. Phillip was just a sweet dream, something to make him smile as he ached inside for what he couldn't have.

Just as he was both resigning himself to his fate and feeling sorry for himself, Leon heard a funny noise coming from the front of his red Ford Focus. As he shut off the music to listen, the noise got a lot worse.

"Oh, fuck."

Chapter 21

Leon had called in that morning to say that he might not be on time because he had to take his car in for repairs. He arrived only a few minutes late, rushing into the office with his suit jacket off and out of breath. It was a good look on him. Phillip only wished he was the one who had stolen his breath while kissing and undressing him.

While chastising himself for his inappropriate fantasies, Phillip barely heard Leon's apology.

"Sorry. They didn't have a loaner for me. One of the guys who works there dropped me off," Leon said as he stood in the doorway of Phillip's office and put on his jacket.

"You're barely even late," Phillip said as he watched Leon pull his clothes into place. Much of the time Leon's suit jacket would end up hanging over the back of his chair, when Phillip was out of the office especially. His tie would be loosened by the end of the day, his collar enticingly unbuttoned, his shirt sleeves rolled up. Leon had the attire, but he just couldn't stay all buttoned up, comfortably imprisoned in a suit the way Phillip was.

"Usually I like to be here first and impress you with my eagerness," Leon said.

"You have nothing to prove," Phillip told him.

"I'll prove it anyway. You're a good boss, you deserve to get the best out of me," Leon said with a smile.

Before Phillip could deny it, the phone rang and Leon went to answer it.

Leon obviously had a higher opinion of him than he deserved. A good boss wouldn't even think of hitting on his employee like Phillip was doing more and more often. The number of times he had to remind himself that Leon was off limits told him that he was standing on dangerous ground.

Work wasn't a safe haven for him any more. Phillip had always placed work at the center of his life. It was where he felt in control. Work was his refuge, a cocoon of facts and numbers with no uncertainties or anguish. Now he had Leon right outside his door – a temptation within easy reach and out of bounds.

When it was time to get Ant, Phillip stopped next to Leon's desk to let him know he was leaving. "I'm going to get Ant now."

"Yes!" Leon said and did a fist pump. Then he grew serious, wanting to make sure he had a reason to celebrate. "You are bringing him back here, right?"

"Yes, but just because I bring him here doesn't mean I expect you to babysit," Phillip told him, but Leon objected.

"Why not? Asking me to babysit Ant is like giving me permission to goof off for half the day."

"I've noticed that you're still doing your job in addition to babysitting,"

Phillip pointed out.

"It's no chore. I love that little guy and I like helping you out," Leon said and looked away like he was embarrassed by what he said.

"It's only until I find the right daycare place."

Leon turned to him again. "What could be better than right here? He can stay here after preschool. We can even give him his own little desk." He pointed to the different places in the office where they could put it.

Phillip had to admit it was a cute idea but not practical. "As much as I like the sound of that, Ant should spend time with other children."

"OK, I won't get used to Ant at the office," Leon said with a pout.

When Phillip came back with Ant, he watched a smile light up Leon's face as Ant ran over to him.

"Am I glad to see you," he said to Ant. "I need your help big time." Leon had Ant help him "recycle" some printouts into paper airplanes.

For the rest of the day, Ant split his time between Phillip and Leon. That way both of them could get just enough work done.

Close to five o'clock, Phillip overheard Leon on the phone trying to arrange for someone to drive him to pick up his car from the mechanic. It seemed like he wasn't having any luck yet. As Phillip went over to his desk, Leon sighed and got ready to make another call.

Phillip stopped him. "I can drive you to pick up your car," he told him. "Sorry, I overheard you talking to your friend."

Leon hesitated to take him up on it, but then he got a what the hell look on his face and he agreed. "It's not too far out of your way."

Ant was also delighted to hear that Leon was getting a ride.

"Are you coming home with us?" he asked hopefully as they all went down to the parking garage.

Leon riffled his hair. "No, you sweet thing. I'm going to get my car from the mechanic. It's being fixed."

"You have a car?" Ant said, impressed.

"Sure I do, and it's red."

"I'm gonna have a red car too when I'm growed up," Ant decided.

"Not a gray one?" Leon asked as they approached Phillip's gray BMW.

"No," Ant said, shaking his head like that choice was unacceptable to his little boy sensibilities.

"He gets that from Tony," Phillip said as he buckled him into his seat. The mention of Ant in a car also made his chest hurt. Just don't be too much like your dad, he wanted to say to him.

Leon must have noticed his mood because he touched him on the arm lightly as they took their seats in front.

"Heavy thoughts sometimes sneak up on me," Phillip said as he started the car.

As he drove and Ant chattered from the back seat, his mood lifted and his mind started to wander. Sitting so close to Leon made him uncomfortably aware of his body every time. He imagined how it would fit against his own, how it would feel under his hands. Traffic was snarled, Phillip's hands were on the wheel, his eyes straight ahead, but Leon was all he saw and felt. The heat of his skin and the hardness of his flesh were already making an indelible impression on Phillip's senses.

Traffic moved, Ant and Leon chatted happily, and too soon, they were at the mechanic's.

"Already?" Ant asked as Leon said his thank you to Phillip and promised to see Ant soon.

Seeing his disappointment, Leon turned to Phillip.

"Can I take him in? He might like to see inside?" he asked, pointing his thumb toward the mechanic's shop.

"I wanna see your car," Ant said eagerly.

Phillip agreed and watched them walk in with Leon holding Ant's tiny hand. After a little while, they came back. Leon didn't look happy and Ant was shaking his head.

"It's no good. They didn't fix it," Ant announced as he climbed back into his car seat with Leon's help.

"I can take you home. Unless you're going to wait," Phillip offered.

"It won't be fixed until tomorrow," Leon said. "If you don't mind, I do need a ride."

"The red car has to sleep over, now we can we take Leon home?" Ant said in a hopeful voice as Leon got back in the front seat.

Phillip correctly assumed that Ant meant home with them.

"To his home, yes," he told Ant to clarify. But then he thought better of it. Turning to Leon, he said, "Unless you want to come to dinner." The offer made his heart beat faster. As he waited for Leon's answer, he tried to breathe evenly and not give away how he felt. Even as he told himself this was going to be only a casual, meaningless visit, he couldn't deny his mounting excitement. The way he wanted this told him just how stupid it was to ask Leon to come over, but Phillip still held his breath and hoped for a yes.

As Leon hesitated, Philip worried that he had given away too much. But that wasn't it. It seemed that Leon wasn't sure if the invitation was real or something he was supposed to refuse. That's why he didn't answer right away. Phillip was going to put more effort into convincing him when Ant jumped in.

"We can eat spaghetti. Uncle Phillip makes good spaghetti."

"I'll even make meatballs this time," Phillip offered to sweeten the deal.

Convinced of his sincerity by the mention of meatballs, Leon accepted.

They went home together and then there was a flurry of activity in the kitchen as they started dinner. Ant loved to get involved. Leon picked him up to reach the things in the top cabinets then swung him around to hand them to

Phillip. Every step took about five times as long as it should have, but it was a lot more fun.

Phillip suddenly felt Leon sidle up to him. He had set Ant on a barstool and they were both eying the meat Phillip was rolling into meatballs.

"Can I have some of that? I want you to try my version," Leon asked. He then put mozzarella in the center of each meatball.

"He's putting cheese in. That's good," Ant said with a look of approval.

"You want to make some?" Leon offered him.

Phillip didn't like the idea of Ant contaminating his hands with raw meat, but he didn't want to spoil their fun. Ant dove in eagerly. All three of them made meatballs, more or less. Ant's were just worked over lumps of misshapen meat.

"I always bake mine. I hate frying," Leon said when he saw Phillip pull out the frying pan. "Come on, stick them in the oven so you're not stuck standing over the stove."

"OK, but that's not very authentic. My Italian ancestors will never forgive me, or Franny and Moe either," Phillip said as he got out a baking pan instead.

"Tell your Italian ancestors it was my fault," Leon told him.

He was right. Phillip didn't want to be standing over a frying pan when he could be spending time with Ant and Leon instead.

As he arranged their mismatched meatballs in the pan, Leon told Ant, "If you have a party, you can put little meatballs on toothpicks."

"Yes. Let's have a party," Ant said.

"We are having a party," Leon told him.

"Yey!"

"Right," Phillip agreed. "This is a dinner party."

It was a funny thought. This was nothing like any dinner party he ever hosted. Phillip had dinner parties infrequently and had them catered. Leon was now telling Ant about mini pizzas. Ant listened with his eyes wide.

He seemed to like talking about food. Phillip wondered if he might not be a chef when he grew up. Tony was never much into cooking. His only interest in food was eating it. Their parents called him a bottomless pit.

"And what are you thinking over here?" Leon asked, seeing that Phillip was distracted.

"I was just picturing Ant in a chef's hat."

"Ooh. Where can we get one of those in his size?" Leon asked eagerly.

"I was thinking that he might be a little cook in the making," Phillip said, looking at Ant fondly. He got a cookbook off a shelf so Ant and Leon could flip through it for ideas. Leon told Ant to pick out a recipe for their next dinner party.

"This one!" Ant said pointing at a picture.

"That's a cake," Leon said.

Ant agreed that it was.

"OK. We have our dessert. Now pick out something for dinner."

Ant pointed at another cake, and Leon and Phillip exchanged a look over his head.

When it was time to start the pasta, Leon took a picture of Ant holding the big pasta pot. In Ant's hands, it looked enormous.

"You can show it to your Gran-gran so she'll know how strong you are," Leon said as he sent the picture to Phillip's phone to pass on to Lilly. "You want to break some spaghetti?" he asked Ant.

"I don't usually break them," Phillip said.

"Not you. Ant is the strongman. He's breaking them," Leon said then he leaned in to whisper to Phillip. "This is no time to be a culinary purist. And, yes, there will be bits of spaghetti everywhere for you to clean up."

Feeling him so close, Phillip shivered. His defenses broke down so easily over nothing. It was a really terrible idea to spend time with this wonderful man. But how could he deny himself just a little bit more of Leon's company? It wasn't just for his own sake though. It was good for Ant to spend time with someone who wasn't as closed off as Phillip.

Around Leon the atmosphere was lighter and more cheerful. Phillip didn't know how he did it with all those demons from his past. It seemed it was Phillip who carried his ghosts with him. All the time he felt like he had to struggle to hold his pain back from Ant, and that meant holding himself back from him too. Ant deserved better.

Phillip had trouble breaking through the shell of his own making. Whenever people gathered, Phillip was always the subdued one. At parties, Ken used to walk off, get into a dozen different conversations then accuse Phillip of ditching him to go mope in a corner. He would have to make more of an effort for Ant's sake, but with Leon around, he didn't have to worry.

Chapter 22

Dinner was lively with Ant getting pasta sauce on his nose and Leon calling him Rudolf the red nosed reindeer. Once dinner was over, they played cards with chocolate chip cookies as their currency.

"Don't let him win too many," Phillip whispered to Leon. He had leaned toward him and got to see his smile up close. For a moment he felt drunk on the sight of him. Even as he drew back, Phillip desperately wanted to feel that smiling mouth against his own.

This time, Ant didn't win every hand, but he still won plenty of cookies.

"That's your last one," Phillip warned him as he watched Ant greedily stuffing his mouth with his winnings.

He pouted and complained of course, whining that he had "winned them". With his face covered in cookie crumbs, he didn't get much sympathy.

After that they watched some cartoons and one nature documentary at Phillip's insistence.

"Your documentary put him right to sleep," Leon said seeing Ant curled up against Phillip on the living room couch.

Phillip smiled down at him and got up gingerly. He let Ant lean on a throw pillow so he could clear the coffee table of snack plates and cookie crumbs. Leon picked up a few things too and helped carry them into the kitchen.

That's where Phillip realized he was for all practical purposes alone with Leon. Looking for something to do, Phillip started loading the dishwasher. It could have waited, but with Leon so temptingly close, he couldn't leave his hands idle.

Again Leon helped. Seeing a toy in the dishwasher, he laughed.

"For some reason Ant likes to sneak his toys in there for a bath." Phillip held the toy and stared at it, but he was really thinking about and trying not to look at Leon. Something about his laugh had set Phillip's heart racing. Phillip wanted his mouth to memorize the exact curve of his lips. He wanted to swallow his laugh and carry it inside him forever. He wanted Leon so much, he was dizzy with it.

Finding the tension filled silence unbearable, Phillip forced himself to start talking. They were cleaning up the dinner dishes so that seemed like as good a subject as any to try and take his mind off wanting Leon.

"I'm cooking all these foods I would never make for myself," he said.

"Like meatballs?"

"I haven't made them in so long. Since college when I made them a few times for my college friends and for Tony too when he was around. Tony loved a meatball sub. The bigger and messier the food, the more he liked it." As he spoke, Phillip realized that he had neglected to tell Ant about that even as they were eating meatballs for dinner. "I have to make sure I tell Ant all the little things I remember about Tony. I don't talk to him enough about his dad. Remembering him is still so painful and I don't want Ant to see that."

"You'll have plenty of time to tell him," Leon assured him and touched his arm briefly.

Phillip hoped so, but sometimes he felt like his grief ran so deep that it was all there was to him. Not now with Leon there, and his touch setting off sparks that ran up his arm right to his heart and his cock. Leon made him feel like he never had before – off balance, feverish with desire and capable of doing something very stupid.

With the dishes done, Phillip rushed to leave the kitchen for the relative safety of the living room. In there Ant was adorably hugging a toss pillow as he slept like a little angel.

"Should we leave him there?" Leon asked seeing that Phillip only gazed at Ant without making any move to disturb him. He just didn't have the heart.

"He sleeps on the couch all the time, the one in my office. If he wakes up at night and I'm in there working, he comes over and sometimes he falls asleep."

"He must like you," Leon said with a smile.

"He's only three. He doesn't know any better."

"I'm not three," Leon said and stared at Phillip pointedly. "Don't look so surprised. Why do you think I'm here?"

"We kidnapped you."

Leon chuckled. Though Phillip stared at his happy face and flirtatious eyes as if mesmerized, he felt that the danger was minimal with Ant only a few feet away – his guardian angel even in sleep.

"That was a lot of fun. Thanks for inviting me," Leon said grabbing his suit jacket off the back of a chair and getting ready to leave.

"Oh," Phillip said, caught off guard. He didn't know he would be losing Leon's company so soon. As they made their way to the door, he worried that he had inadvertently given Leon some kind of signal that he wanted him to leave. That was the furthest thing from the truth. Remembering that Leon needed a ride, Phillip looked over at the sleeping Ant.

"I would offer to drive you but..." Phillip started to say.

Leon shook his head. "Don't worry about it. It's OK. I'm just going to hail a cab."

"Will your car be ready in the morning?"

"That's what they said. I won't be late again," Leon assured him.

"Don't worry about that," Phillip said as they headed to the front door.

"You're a nice boss. Especially now that you have Ant."

"He's a good influence?"

"He is."

Phillip walked him out the whole time wishing that he could ask him to stay. As they stepped out into the hallway, he realized he was alone with Leon again. He held his breath and watched Leon's long finger press the button to call the elevator. Leon turned to him with a hesitant smile and Phillip froze.

The display above the elevator doors changed while the elevator moved up.

It seemed to Phillip that Leon had just set a timer and his heart raced as the time started to run out. That elevator would be here too soon and then Leon would be gone.

He just couldn't let him leave like that – not without something more, something tactile, real and warm that would stay with him even after Leon was gone. Phillip wanted all of him, but he would settle for just one touch, and a handshake was the perfect way to hide his need behind civility. He offered Leon his hand. He took it and then everything fell apart.

With their hands clasped between them, Leon used the grip to pull himself closer. His other hand gripped the front of Phillip's shirt right over his heart. Phillip felt the hold as firm and demanding, but the look in Leon's eyes was uncertain, almost frightened, and completely heartbreaking.

Phillip couldn't take the look in those eyes for another second. He reached out, pulled Leon even closer until their mouths met. Blinding, searing pleasure shot through him. Their mouths pressed together hard, tongues entwining. Fingertips brushed over clothes, catching on seams, grasping for buttons and zippers. Their bodies were grinding, heating up. With no thought for decency or even taking one single breath, Phillip didn't want to stop. They kissed all in a rush right there in the hallway with the elevator arriving behind them and being ignored.

*

After leaving Phillip's, Leon meant to get a cab but he didn't. His legs moved on their own, finding their way home with no help from his brain. The streets were well-lit, storefronts and traffic lights added some color to the glow of the night. Traffic streamed past, restaurants did brisk business. Now and then Leon passed other people on foot, not that he really saw them. While his legs took him home, the rest of him was still back there in front of the elevator, kissing Phillip like he would die, trying to grope him everywhere.

Silently he had begged Phillip not to stop, but he did. He ended their kiss and pushed Leon away gently but firmly. Though it felt as if Leon was being cut off from life itself, it wasn't a surprise. He was only surprised at himself. Was that really him kissing Phillip in a frenzy, like he was going to take it all the way right there in the hallway?

In that moment, he felt like nothing would stop him. He was only aware of Phillip. Nothing else existed, not his past or any dream of a future. There was only Phillip, and Leon had to have him, all of him, every inch of his body and every hitched breath.

Leon wondered at his boldness, and at the same time ached at how abruptly it all ended. That wasn't an end, was it? It couldn't be. It had to be a start, an amazing start. And as much as he was afraid, Leon couldn't wait for more. He was starved for this.

Whenever he tried to throw himself into something physical – with a few drinks in him to give him courage – he failed. Same thing when he tiptoed toward a more meaningful encounter. He would start with coffee, then move on to lunch then dinner and end up with nothing. He sometimes satisfied a guy out of a sense of obligation but never true desire. And after that he never wanted to see him again.

Going to clubs and bars with Pavel, he felt like he was putting up an ad for something that wasn't for sale. Pavel didn't mind. He called him the perfect wingman. "Don't worry about not being up for grabs. Just watch my back, make sure no one slips anything in my drink. And when a hot guy hits on you, just shove him in my direction."

Pavel took it in stride, but Leon worried that he was never going to get over his fear. And he wasn't the only one who didn't like the odds. After a while, Leon noticed that only newcomers and diehards bothered with him. Too many no-thank-yous and shakes of the head had given him a reputation as a nonstarter. Leon didn't mind too much. It took the decision out of his hands. Refusing always made him wonder what if this guy was the one and he just blew it.

Now that he had met Phillip, he didn't wonder any more. Meeting the one wasn't like picking out the right shoes. It was like a clap of thunder striking your body and lightning running through your veins. Leon remembered the force of that feeling when he first met Phillip. At the time, he thought it was just intense attraction on top of nerves because it was his first day on the job.

Phillip seemed so exacting and strict on first sight. Leon was a little scared of him. He knew better now. Phillip wasn't strict at all especially with him. More importantly, what Leon felt when he met him was no simple attraction. It was a feeling of need and desire that gripped him then and just wouldn't let go no matter how hard he struggled.

Still, he shouldn't have latched onto Phillip like he did tonight even if it did get him the best, hottest kiss anybody ever had. He was still buzzing from it, elated and terrified. He didn't know what was going to happen next, but he knew what he yearned for with every fiber of his being. If he was brave enough to go after it, if he was stupid and reckless, he might wreck everything or have everything he wanted.

Chapter 23

With physical therapy, Bernie was getting back the use of her left arm. She also spent more time on her feet, though she grumbled about her walker. As she slowly made her way toward the outdoor picnic tables at Ivy Gate, she complained about her walker to Phillip. "They don't trust me to stay upright without it."

Bernie sat down carefully with Lilly's help, which she tried to refuse.

"Stop fussing."

"Who's fussing?" Lilly told her. "I just don't want you to fall over on your keister."

They were under the big trees that shaded the picnic tables. Around them, other residents with visitors of their own were enjoying the nice day. Phillip saw some card games, which caught Ant's attention and made Phillip think about Leon. There was also a chess match being played in extreme slow motion. No one had any interest in that, and even the players might have dozed off.

Bernie gave Phillip an update on her therapy, or – as Lilly said – she bellyached about it. To show off her new skills to Ant, Bernie held a stress ball and squeezed it to make its eyes pop out. Ant laughed. Then he told her and Lilly his adventures in preschool, the new daycare and also about going to the office. "Then we maked a party with spaghetti and meatballs and Leon."

"Leon, who's that again?" Bernie asked with a mischievous, lopsided grin. The glint in her eyes worried Phillip a little.

Ant had certainly mentioned Leon plenty of times before. He was one of his favorite people after all. "Leon is nice, and we have lots of fun."

"Sounds like a great guy," Bernie said with a wink at Phillip. Now he was worried even more.

"He is," Ant confirmed. "And his name means that he is a lion."

"Is he handsome?" Bernie asked knowingly.

Ant wasn't sure. He looked at Phillip for help in that department.

Phillip decided to deflect the question. "He's my assistant."

"Sure he is," Bernie said with another wink. Was this woman psychic?

"Well, maybe he's more than that," Phillip had to admit. Neither that nor the fact that he was gay seemed to be a revelation to her and Lilly.

"We're way ahead of you there," Bernie said with a wiggle of one of her eyebrows. She had already made up her mind about him and that he had something going with Leon. Phillip couldn't exactly say that she was wrong, and last night he had almost proved her right, but he did wonder how they knew he was gay.

"And what else have you been up to?" Lilly asked Ant. She could never hear enough about Ant's new life.

"I helped Uncle Phillip do laundry," Ant said proudly.

"Just like you used to help me. You're such a good boy," Lilly praised him.

Bernie had a different take on it though. "Yes, just like he used to help an old lady do the laundry," she said.

"Old lady? Look who's talking," Lilly said, but Bernie's real target was Phillip.

She wasn't shy when it came to sharing her opinion. "You know, you're a good-looking young man. Maybe even better looking without all that." Bernie pointed at his suit. "You just need to fix yourself up a little, and you'll be beating them off with a stick."

"I'm taking a break from all that," Phillip told her.

"A break?" She scoffed. "You get back on that horse, young man, and you ride him for all he's worth."

Phillip groaned. If there was any mercy in the world, the ground would open up and swallow him before Bernie had a chance to say another word of encouragement. No such luck. Bernie was on a roll and she wasn't stopping.

And while Phillip was subjected to Bernie's dissection, Ant was at the next table, flipping through a travel magazine he had found lying abandoned on the bench. He was making faces at the pictures, oblivious to the distress his uncle was in.

Bernie continued her torment. "Now don't get me wrong. The suit is nice. It suits you, you could say." She chuckled at her own pun. "But nowadays you got to show it off. Things have changed. It's not just women who've got to strut their stuff."

"What are you telling him, Bernie?" Lilly asked. "He is a serious and proper young man," she said in his defense.

"And single," Bernice said. "A virile young man like you doing laundry instead of living it up. It's a crying shame."

"Excuse me?" Phillip said. He wondered if simply running away from this conversation was an option.

It was for Lilly. She took Ant by the hand and said she was going to show him off and "make them all eat their hearts out."

That left Phillip alone with Bernie. Since she was being so forthcoming, he felt he had nothing to lose by asking her, "And how did you know I was gay?"

"Me and Lill talked it over and we sussed it out between us."

"I see," Phillip said though he really didn't. One thing was clear in any case – Lilly didn't disapprove and that was a relief.

That day Ant brought along some preschool homework. He showed it off to Lilly and Bernie like it was a Christmas gift. Once they got home from Ivy Gate, Ant couldn't wait to get started. Phillip had him sit at the kitchen counter while he made dinner.

Ant hunched over the worksheets with letters and numbers for him to trace then color. Phillip watched him trace the numbers, more or less, but when he reached the letters, he gave up. Taking a green crayon in his fist, Ant started

drawing a sloppy spiral all over the paper.

Phillip stopped him. "What letter is that supposed to be? Try tracing some of these letters again."

Ant complained, "It's too hard."

"You still have to do it. Or at least you have to try."

"You're strict." Ant pouted.

"I'm strict but fair."

Ant wasn't convinced of that, but he did get down to the grueling work of tracing somewhere in the neighborhood of the letters. Proud of him, Phillip kissed the top of his head.

Seeing Ant struggle with this early version of schoolwork reminded him so much of Tony. When it came to homework, Tony would sit still for whole minutes before he found something better to do. He wasn't happy if he wasn't on the move. He had to be chased down, and even then he barely did enough to pass.

Tony got his irrepressible nature from their mother. Phillip was more serious and subdued like their dad. And now there was Ant. Whereas Tony had been brash and unapologetic about it, Ant was quiet with occasional bursts of enthusiasm. Excitement would build in him until he was like a tea kettle ready to boil. That's what made Phillip ask him, "Do you know the teapot song?"

Ant mimed the handle and spout to show that he did. But it turned out that he didn't know the words so Phillip taught him.

"You can do it for Lilly and Bernie next time we go to see them."

"You have to do it with me," Ant said. "I'm gonna forget how it goes."

Phillip laughed at the idea. Now that would be something. As he told Ant that he was too old, he tried not to look sad thinking how Tony would have done it. Phillip could see him singing and acting out the song right next to his son. He wouldn't have been embarrassed. He would have done it without hesitation.

Tears came to his eyes as he wished that Ant could have gotten to know his dad. It made him angry at Tony too. If he hadn't lived so recklessly... But there was no point to either wishes or blame. Phillip just had to do his best for Ant.

Chapter 24

His world was transforming all around him. The dreary, antiseptic look of his apartment was giving way to toys everywhere and smudges wherever little fingers could reach. The messy proof that a child lived there made Phillip smile. It made him so happy to have Ant in his life.

Toys left on the floor and colorful cereals in his kitchen cupboards marked Ant's territory, but it wasn't just at home that things were changing. At the office, people smiled at Phillip as if they were congratulating a new dad.

After he got the news about Tony, they had all watched him come into the office pale and drawn, suffering clearly written on his face. He had never been lively, but after Tony died, he couldn't recover even his usual state of grim placidity. And now look at him. This little kid more than restored him. He made a new man of him, almost a dad, and definitely a happy uncle.

And now that he had Ant, to want Leon in his life as well was pure greed. Leon was fun but also patient and accepting. And he was so beautiful, sometimes it hurt Phillip to look at him.

Lately Phillip had found himself wondering how Leon felt about him. All their time together had centered on Ant. Their conversations at work and at lunch had taken place within a boundary that Phillip was afraid to cross. But last night he had crossed it and with no thought for the consequences.

Where did that impulse come from? His approach to relationships was always more pragmatic, along the lines of "I should have a boyfriend and this man fits the bill". After a cold start, the way his relationships ended seemed to prove that he wasn't fit to share his life with anyone.

David left him without warning or explanation and moved in with someone else. Afterward he told him, "I'm surprised you noticed I was gone. All you do is work. You were never there even when you were."

His breakup with Cory wasn't as abrupt. But after it ended, Phillip found out Cory's relationship with his next boyfriend had started months before their breakup. In his defense, Cory told him that he needed someone with a little warmth, "Someone who actually wants to be with me. Not someone who lives in the past."

Others had told him the same thing – that he was cold and dead inside, stuck in the past. Ken certainly had.

His failed relationships only left Phillip with a heart full of pain, mistrust and disappointment. So why was he dreaming of throwing himself into Leon's arms? Maybe because just thinking of him made him smile. Or maybe Ant gave him hope for the future.

At the office, Phillip was physically at work while his mind was elsewhere, busy trying to reconcile his present, his past and his possible future. Was his future out there at the desk in front? Phillip forced himself not to stare at Leon, who worked diligently but seemed on edge. Phillip planned to talk to

him about that, but Leon beat him to the punch.

"OK. It's lunchtime. I'm officially off the clock. I can speak freely, so listen up," Leon commanded as he came to stand in front of his desk.

As he gave him his full attention, Phillip noticed that he had closed the door of his office, something he had never done before.

"You can always speak freely," Phillip told him.

That only caused Leon to glare at him with his beautiful, hazel eyes. "I said listen up, not talk. Last night I realized something that I should have realized a lot sooner. You're never going to make a move on me."

Phillip started to disagree. "Technically I did..."

"What happened to listening?"

"Sorry."

"You're too much of a gentleman," Leon complained.

"Is that another way of saying uptight?"

Leon glared at him for yet another interruption, but then just plowed on. "I wasn't trying to push myself on you or rush you. I just couldn't wait for you to get it in gear."

"I'm your boss. I can't just..."

"I'm swallowing my pride here! Don't you dare reject me over a technicality," Leon snapped.

Phillip stared at him, speechless for a second. Reject him? How could he? He wanted to dive into those eyes and never come up for air. He was dying to grab a handful of his hair, twist it around his fingers and kiss him deep and hard. But somehow he still managed to resist.

"It's not a technicality," he told Leon reasonably. "It's the reality of our situation, our respective positions."

"Listen to you bull-shitting me," Leon said, dismissing Phillip's concerns. "It's a technicality, and it's not going to stop me from getting my hands on you. All over you."

Phillip held his breath and shut his eyes. He groaned inwardly at the thought of Leon's strong hands, his long fingers touching him everywhere. Leon was on the other side of his desk, not touching him, but somehow his caresses already burned him. Phillip was on fire and still Leon didn't let up.

"All this time I was trying to show you I can be a gentleman too. But nothing gets done if we're both on our best behavior. Let's lock the door and..."

"Leon," was all Phillip managed to say.

"What? All good assistants boss their bosses around," Leon said in his defense.

"I asked Thompson to stop by with the revised Joiner projections. He'll be here any minute," Phillip informed him.

Leon leaned over his desk to say, "Fuck Thompson."

"What did I do?" Thompson asked from the doorway to Phillip's office. He had only poked his head in. He might have knocked beforehand. Phillip

couldn't say for sure.

Leon turned his fiercest glare yet at poor Thompson then stormed out. Phillip looked to make sure he only went to fume at his desk.

"Let's make this quick," he told Thompson, who looked kind of scared as he glanced back over his shoulder at Leon.

Once Thompson was out of there – in record time – Phillip went over to talk to Leon.

"Am I getting a reprimand or something?" Leon asked as soon as Phillip approached his desk.

"Hardly. Thank you for making the first move. I'd like to reschedule sex on my desk for another time. For now, can we just take it slowly and get to know each other?" Phillip said simply. After last night, it was too late to backtrack, but he couldn't move forward recklessly either. It wasn't in his nature. Now his fear was rising with Leon's silence. Maybe this wasn't enough.

Leon stared up at him. Phillip could see his face soften from the scary, but attractive glower he had been wearing.

"Can I call you Phil?"

"No."

"How is this progress?"

"Neither one of us got rejected," Phillip said with a shrug.

Leon rolled his eyes, but he seemed happy. A smile lingered at the corners of his mouth though he looked at Phillip like he was saying, "You owe me."

Phillip silently promised to give him the best time of his life... once he got up the courage. Until then he enjoyed the sweet frisson between them and eventually went to pick up Ant from his new daycare place.

As soon as he brought him back to the office, Leon noticed Ant wasn't himself. "What's going on with this guy today? Why so quiet?"

"We're going to meet Ant's new pediatrician, Dr. Woo. She is a very nice lady, but Ant is a little worried." Ant didn't have a regular pediatrician. Lilly only took him to the doctor when she saw the need. He wasn't used to it and feared the worst especially after having to get vaccinated so he could start preschool.

"I don't wannna a shot," Ant said in a whisper.

"I told you. There won't be a shot," Phillip tried to reassure him.

Leon reinforced his point. "Sounds like you're just doing a meet and greet. Just a little look-see. 'Hi there, nice to meet you, doc.' Nothing to worry about," Leon said, but Ant still looked uneasy.

Phillip let him sit with Leon since he was better able to distract him. For a while Ant was diverted, and Phillip even heard his sweet laugh a few times. Then it was time for the meeting with the doctor, and Ant got nervous again.

"You want me to come with you," Leon offered and looked at Phillip for his

approval.

Phillip had seen Ant brighten at the idea. Relieved to have Leon along, Phillip nodded. "It won't be so bad if Leon comes with us," he said and Ant agreed.

Leon sat in the back of the car with Ant and played I Spy with him. Ant's contribution was to say, "Where? Where?" every single time. Once they arrived, they walked into the doctor's office with both of them holding Ant by the hand.

Stepping inside, Ant squeezed their hands tighter. That characteristic doctor's office smell probably didn't put him at ease. Leon pointed out the other kids in the waiting room. Some of them were playing or looking at various electronic devices. One little girl smiled at Ant, and he smiled back tentatively.

"I know," Leon said, then he went up to the receptionist. "Can I have a piece of paper, a marker, and a paperclip, please?"

She handed them over. Leon wrote the word "Visitor" on the note and attached it to Ant's shirt pocket with the paperclip.

"That's your visitor's pass. Now everyone will know that you're not a patient, that you're just visiting," Leon explained.

"And no shots," Ant added leaning toward Leon to whisper. He didn't want the other children to hear.

When Ant's name was called, Dr. Woo did her part to ease Ant into the experience. A nurse showed him some equipment and how it was used. With both Phillip and Leon right there, Ant was somewhat reassured by the introduction. No one could say he was looking forward to his real checkup, but he was a lot less scared now.

Ant's more cheerful mood meant that Phillip could relax a little too. That's when he noticed that Dr. Woo and the nurse treated him and Leon as if they were a couple. Looking over at Leon, Phillip found the idea thrilling. That man could be his and everyone would know it. The thought of it had an incredible pull on his dick, his heart and his ego.

Chapter 25

As they dropped off Leon back at the parking garage at work, Phillip got out to thank him. His car door stood open while Ant was in his car seat busy playing with an interlocking puzzle he got at the doctor's office.

"That was a breeze because of you. Thank you for coming with us," Phillip said. He remembered how worried he had been about the appointment and how well things turned out once Leon stepped into the picture.

Leon didn't accept Phillip's gratitude though. "What are you thanking me for? That was nothing."

"I guess to you it's nothing because you're just being yourself," Phillip said. He was gazing at Leon, unable to look away.

Lately Phillip had a completely new, more personal appreciation of him. He seemed radiant to him and more intimately real since their kiss. He could still feel the length of his body pressed against him, the insistent hardness of it, and the yielding of his mouth. It was an intoxicating mix.

He was unsteady on his feet at the thought of it and almost ready to lunge at Leon right there. To remind himself of why he couldn't, he turned to look at Ant with his head down looking kind of mad at that puzzle.

"I don't deserve the credit. I think Ant brings out the best in people," Leon said, but his eyes stayed steadily on Phillip.

"You mean me?" Phillip said since Leon had given him that meaningful look.

"Sure, but me too. I like coming to the office now. I mean... I mean I like it even more now," Leon corrected himself.

Phillip laughed.

"Like that," Leon said pointing at Phillip. "These days I know there's a good chance I'll see you smile."

"That's not just because of Ant," Phillip said. His confession came out in a low voice. He looked down embarrassed and Leon leaned in as if he couldn't quite hear him.

He gave Phillip a teasing look. "Did you just say more than you meant to?" Leon asked. It was like he was reminding Phillip to take back what he said or forever hold his peace.

Rather than backtrack, Phillip decided to take a step forward.

"You should come home with us again," Phillip said.

Leon seemed to hesitate. Before answering him, he leaned in through the open car door. "Hey, Ant, is anything good for dinner at your place?"

"Are you gonna come over?" Ant asked. He obviously liked the idea.

"He might be. What should we make for Leon so he'll come over for dinner tonight?" Phillip asked him.

"Don't say cake," Leon warned him.

"French fries!"

Leon made a face. "I'm not a fan of frying. But first things first." He sat

backwards in the front seat so he could talk to Ant. "Hey, little guy, let me ask you something. Is it OK if I date your uncle?"

"Date?" Ant said, tilting his head to the side.

"Is it OK for me and your uncle to have fun together, just us?" Leon asked.

"Yes. You can have fun," Ant said seriously.

"We promise to have lots of fun with you too," Leon told him.

"Parties!"

"OK, but tonight I want to take you guys out to dinner. And yes, they have fries." Leon looked from Ant to Phillip.

Ant was for it, and now it was Phillip's turn to agree. "I guess we're going out."

"I have the perfect place picked out – Paloma's by Bronson Plaza," Leon said as he sat in the passenger seat facing forward.

"I know it," Phillip said as he got back behind the wheel. "But what about reservations?" It wasn't the kind of place where they were likely to get a table at the last minute.

"My friend Katya is a pastry chef there," Leon explained as Phillip drove. "She's my best friend's sister and also a friend in her own right. When her brother, Pavel, and I helped her move, she promised me a free meal at Paloma's. Her foldout couch broke our backs. I'll trade in the free meal for getting us in without reservations." Leon leaned back to ask Ant, "Ant-man, do you know what a pastry chef does?"

Ant shook his head.

"My friend Katya is a pastry chef, and she makes cakes and all kinds of other desserts."

Ant's eyes lit up at this news.

"I'm texting her so we can get special treatment," he told Phillip. She replied soon after. "We're in."

*

Leon was proud of himself not only for coming up with a plan on short notice but also for pulling it off, with Katya's help. After tonight, he was going to owe her. Whatever it took, he was just glad he could take Phillip out on what he considered their first date.

The evening air was just starting to cool and it was still light out when they got out of the car. Flowers were in full bloom around the fountain and along the paths. They walked through the Bronson Plaza and stopped at the three-tiered fountain. Ant watched the water jump and dance, and Phillip gave him some pennies to make a wish. Ant didn't quite get it but he wished anyway.

"Gimme ice cream!" he yelled at the streams of water coming out of trumpet shaped openings. He waited and when no ice cream appeared, he looked at Phillip. "What now?"

"Let's go eat," Phillip said.

"The fountain probably doesn't want you to have ice cream before you have dinner," Leon told Ant as he walked between them.

"The fountain is strict like Uncle Phillip," Ant complained as they walked to the front of the restaurant.

Ant kept looking back, but the fountain didn't spit out any magic ice cream. Good thing Paloma's had big windows looked out onto Bronson Plaza so Ant could still watch for the appearance of ice cream even after they were seated. With the fountain and the walkways all lit up for the evening, it was a nice view.

Inside the place was high end but not too intimidating. If anything, Paloma's was deceptively casual while being kind of pricey once you got a look at the menu. It was one of those places that keep it simple, but make you pay through the nose for premium ingredients. Katya was proud of working there and raved about the freshness and quality of everything they served. That's why Leon had chosen it. This seemed like a place worthy of bringing Phillip and Ant.

A little after they were seated, Katya came to their table to say hi. She was a petite and much prettier version of her brother. Reddish blond hair cut short, blue eyes, she greeted them with a dimpled smile as she approached.

When Leon introduced Phillip, he got up like a gentleman and thanked her for getting them in.

"I like pulling a few strings. It makes me feel like a big shot," Katya said with a wave of her hand then turned to Ant expectantly.

"And the little one is Phillip's nephew, Ant, and he wants your job," Leon told her.

"What a cutie," she said, disarmed by him instantly. "Hi there. My name is Katya."

"She's the one who makes desserts," Leon told Ant.

"And I'm going to make an extra special one for you," she said to Ant who looked pleased as well as shy.

"You're his hero now," Leon told her.

"You brought him here, you're the hero," she told Leon then she complimented him. "It's nice to see you all suited up. You two look well matched instead of a scruffy guy and a gentleman."

"I'm not scruffy," Leon said.

She pointed at his hair and his five o'clock shadow. "You're a little scruffy, but it looks good on you." She smiled at all three of them and then excused herself.

Once she went back to work, Phillip leaned across the table and told Leon, "This is on me."

"No way. I have some overtime money burning a hole in my pocket."

"Leon..." Phillip started to object but Leon cut him off.

"You can leave a generous tip."

Dinner was delicious though Ant's was fairly simple. He had one of Paloma's high-end, specialty burgers stripped of everything that made it special and fries on the side. Katya outdid herself with the desserts. Leon ordered a tower of chocolate pastry held together by a luscious peanut butter cream. Phillip had an assortment of fruit with a salty caramel dip. For Ant, Katya had made a striped ice cream concoction with spikes of chocolate sticking out of it.

"A hedgehog," Ant said. He was thrilled, but that didn't keep him from tasting all three of their desserts and eating most of Phillip's. He was a happy boy.

To walk off the meal and especially the dessert, they meandered around Bronson Plaza and enjoyed the nighttime scenery. Ant walked on the benches with Leon swinging him up and letting him jump down with his help. He could see Phillip's hand twitch and his lips press together every time Ant bravely hopped down off a bench.

"I won't let him fall," Leon promised him in a whisper as they walked side by side.

"I know." When Phillip turned to him, Leon could see trust in his luminous, gray eyes.

Back at Phillip's, Ant had definite ideas about their after dinner entertainment. "Let's watch *Finding Nemo* again," Ant said. Of course Ant would love a movie about a little fish and a bunch of other sea creatures.

Phillip looked at Leon like he thought he might say no. Say no to Ant – impossible. They watched it together, and Ant was engrossed as if he was watching it for the first time. Phillip was into it as well.

"You like that movie," Leon said.

"I can relate," Phillip said ruefully no doubt thinking about his search for Ant and also his brother.

When it was time for Ant to go to bed there was a minor struggle and some whining.

"But Leon is here," Ant protested.

"You gave me permission to date your uncle, remember?" Leon told him. "We need to spend a little time alone together."

Ant frowned but then grudgingly said OK. He marched off to get ready. Leon could hear him complaining how he had to brush his teeth "all the time!" But once he was in his pajamas, he ran back to the living room to hug Leon goodnight. He was such a sweet little guy.

"We'll watch *Shark Tale* next time," Ant whispered to him.

"It's a deal. Goodnight, Ant-man. Sleep tight," Leon told him.

Ant took Phillip's hand and let him lead him off to bed.

Going to the big windows, Leon looked out at that impressive view. City lights filled his vision. Beyond them the world was shadowy and black with strings of lights marking the highways as they crisscrossed in the distance.

For a moment, Leon caught sight of his own reflection and frowned at himself critically. Was Phillip really attracted to all this scruffiness and inner turmoil? Leon sighed. What could he do? He was who he was – a lanky guy with curly hair, who needed a shave. The real problem was inside. He was kind of a mess. Trying to ignore his own reflection, he waited impatiently, or was it nervously, for Phillip to come back.

When Phillip walked into the living room, Leon tried to breathe evenly. It was no big deal, just the man he wanted more than anything coming over to him, putting his hands on his hips, and looking into his eyes.

"Is this really a proper date with Ant coming along and *Finding Nemo* as our date movie?" Phillip asked. "I was thinking of something more formal and adult."

"We can get more adult about it. If we wait until Ant is good and asleep and we mess around, then it will be a proper date," Leon suggested.

"Don't forget that Ant is a light sleeper," Phillip reminded Leon just as he pulled close to him.

While Leon's arms went around him, Phillip's hands stayed on his hips. Feeling his halfhearted resistance to any serious action, Leon pressed himself up against him harder. Staring into his eyes and acting braver than he felt, he warned Phillip, "Give it up or I'll get drunk and seduce you."

"You mean get me drunk and seduce me?"

"No. Then you'd be impaired and that would be wrong." He didn't mention that he was the one who needed the booze induced courage.

"For what it's worth, you wouldn't have to do much to seduce me drunk or sober," Phillip said in a low voice and inclined his head toward him.

"That's good to hear," Leon whispered and his breath caught in his throat. Phillip's hands had slipped to his back and he was holding him tighter now. Leon shouldn't have stopped breathing. Now he didn't know how to start again. His vision was swimming as he leaned in, his lips inches from Phillip's.

The heat of Phillip's body was burning him. Both their cocks were thickening and getting hard. There was no air between them only hardness and heat. Then Phillip's lips were on his, soft at first then firm, unrelenting, his tongue probing. Leon moaned, dizzy at the sensation that burned through him like a fire.

Phillip's hold on him was almost crushing, the kiss getting deeper all the time. His arms were like steel. Leon couldn't breathe. He struggled away from Phillip and then laughed at himself for not taking a breath when he had the chance. There was a little bit of panic building inside him, but it wasn't too bad.

He threw himself into Phillip's arms again. "I could drown in you," Leon told him.

"Me too. We better go to my bedroom," Phillip said as he held him off lightly.

They stumbled to his bedroom between kisses, pulling and pushing each other until the bedroom door was closed behind them.

Chapter 26

Phillip's bedroom was decorated in gray and darker gray. The furniture was modern and a little stark, the lighting dim. It might look somber, the bed impeccably made, but it must have seen more action than Leon's bedroom ever did. That worried him.

"Are we fucking?" Leon asked too bluntly. He tried to hide his anxiety as his eyes glanced from the perfectly made bed to Phillip.

"Not tonight. We don't need to rush," he said, his voice low, his gaze hooded as it roamed Leon's body.

Phillip's answer was both a relief and a disappointment. Leon wanted him. For now he would settle for whatever Phillip had in mind – hopefully stripping him naked and sucking him off for all he was worth. Whatever happened between them tonight, Leon had to make sure not to lose it.

This was what he started by the elevator, when he dared Phillip to kiss him, but this was no sudden, hurried kiss. It was more real and more frightening. His crazy, impossible fantasy of Phillip was coming true. He was desperate for Phillip but not sure if he could handle what was about to happen.

Being alone with a man always felt like he was standing on a ledge. Here he was anyway, in Phillip's bedroom and in his arms, rushing ahead blindly, recklessly, trying to leave his fear in the dust. With the thickness of Phillip's cock so hard and real against his own erection, he was too turned on to think or to slow down. Hands shaking, fingers clumsy, he was only able to undress Phillip with a lot of his help.

He couldn't keep his hands from groping him everywhere. Before his clothes were off all the way, Leon was taking every opportunity to feel him. His shirt unbuttoned, pants open, Phillip was too beautiful, every muscle perfect under Leon's hands.

Pulling his shirt down his arms roughly, Leon nuzzled Phillip. He kissed his neck and his powerful shoulders. Phillip cupped his face. Leon closed his eyes and felt his earlobe between Phillip's lips then between his teeth. That drew a gasp from Leon. As Phillip licked the same spot, a soft moan escaped from him. Phillip clutched him closer then loosened his hold as he started to unbutton Leon's shirt.

His touch was light but sure, his fingers deft as he undressed Leon. The whole time Leon looked into his eyes, telling himself, "It's OK, it's Phillip." His caresses soothed Leon even as he was laid bare in front of him.

After a thorough kiss, Phillip looked him over with lust in his eyes. "Lie down," he ordered Leon.

Leon dropped back on the bed, grateful to have something to support him because his legs just wouldn't. Taking a deep breath, he watched in nervous excitement as Phillip kneeled on the bed and leaned over him. He only kissed Leon once on the mouth then ran his hands down his body to his ankles.

As Leon shuddered, Phillip kissed his way from his instep over his calf to

his inner thigh. There he reversed direction and worked his way down Leon's other leg. Once he made his way back up to his hip, Phillip took a moment to tell him, "You're beautiful."

"Too skinny," Leon disagreed, panting.

"Perfect," Phillip said before stroking Leon's cock with his hand and giving the head a quick lick.

Leon writhed, his hips rising for more.

"Not yet," Phillip told him and he let go.

Leon groaned pitifully then gasped as Phillip took his right nipple between his teeth. While Phillip licked and nibbled, Leon ran his fingers through his hair and moaned his name. Every time Phillip's cock brushed against him or pressed into him hard as steel, Leon shivered with need and begged shamelessly.

After Phillip's mouth had been everywhere else and his tongue had licked every inch of his overheated skin, Leon finally got what he wanted. Phillip took him into his mouth with a long deep moan that reverberated through Leon's whole body. Phillip's mouth was hot and wet, so tight around his cock then pulling hard, making Leon choke back screams of pleasure that wanted to tear out of him.

Phillip's mouth was driving him out of his mind. He didn't know how he stayed quiet. It was bliss. His thighs in a hard grip, his cock in heaven, Leon rode wave after wave of incredible pleasure, always flying higher until it was too much. He couldn't hold back. He moaned Phillip's name and spilled down his throat.

Panting and dazed, he watched Phillip rise on his hands and knees and come to hover over him. His serious, gray eyes looked down at Leon spent and overjoyed under him. Leon grinned up at him like a fool and relished the intensity in his eyes.

Phillip leaned down to kiss him and Leon grabbed his chance to get on top. He flipped them over then kissed his way down Phillip's throat then over his chest. Leaving his hands over his nipples to pinch and torture them, Leon trailed his mouth lower and lower.

"I won't last," Phillip warned him. After he said that, he didn't come for an eternity of sucking that drove Leon wild.

Fear and ugly memories hovered in the background, but he pushed them back. Leon had Phillip's beautiful cock between his lips and the rest in the sliding grip of his right hand. He had never loved a cock so much or worshiped it as admiringly.

His own cock was in his other fist, harder than it had ever been as Leon lost himself to the act of pleasing his lover. Phillip was everything to him. Then ecstasy tightened their bodies and they were coming together with Phillip gasping his name and tangling his fingers in Leon's hair.

For a while they rested against each other, wordless and spent. Then Leon

remembered what Phillip said, and he raised his head from his chest to question him.

"You call that not lasting?" Leon said while giving Phillip a wry look and enjoying the sight of his naked body under him.

"I usually last longer than that," Phillip said evenly.

"You'll have to show me sometime," Leon challenged him and felt Phillip's hands move over his back down to his ass.

"That was with other guys. With you, I don't know if I can. I have no self-control where you are concerned," Phillip told him, his voice hushed and deep in Leon's ear.

"You're not going to start kicking yourself for what we did," Leon said while giving him a look that warned him that he better not.

Phillip smiled at him and pulled him closer. "No. I've made peace with the fact that I'm a terrible boss."

"You're good at other stuff, so don't worry about it." Leon gave him a teasing look, but Phillip didn't react so he made himself clear. "I meant sucking cock."

"I got that," he said and gave Leon a teasing smile of his own.

Leon could watch him smile forever, but he still swooped in and kissed Phillip long and hard.

Too soon after that, they were both dressed and slowly making their way to the bedroom door.

"I wish you could stay," Phillip said, echoing what Leon was feeling. He knew it was too soon for that.

As they nuzzled and kissed their way to the front door of the apartment, Phillip stopped. He held Leon's hand and said, "I was wondering if you wouldn't mind coming over again one of these days."

"Mind?"

"It's for a specific reason. I have some old videos of Tony. I wanted to show them to Ant before, but I wasn't sure I could watch them and not fall apart. That's why I need you. With you here, I think I can hold it together."

Leon agreed easily. "Sure I'll be here."

"Thank you. I feel bad keeping the videos from Ant. That's like keeping the son and the father apart. I want him to know Tony."

"I can bring snacks," Leon offered. "Unless you want this to be a more solemn occasion."

"They are videos of Tony, so it's definitely not a solemn occasion," Phillip said with a smile. "By all means bring snacks. I want this to be a happy memory for Ant and not one of me bawling my eyes out."

"If it looks like you're going to lose it, I'll make sure to distract Ant," Leon promised.

"Thank you."

"Or maybe I'll distract you," Leon said and he kissed him. Letting his tongue

explore his mouth, he was already dreaming of the next time they would be alone.

Chapter 27

Phillip had never wanted anyone to stay like he did tonight. Watching Leon leave was agony. His eyes were like sunlight in the morning. His voice was full of warmth and humor. As he lay in bed, Phillip wished he could hear it right now. He reached for the phone then stopped himself.

Leon was probably in bed by now. He couldn't call him in the middle of the night and wake him. He had work tomorrow. Phillip sighed. Things with Leon were so confusing right now. He didn't know where the boundary lay. Leon was in his life, but he was still his assistant.

He was also the man who was stretched out on Phillip's bed a little while ago, the dark gray covers a contrast to his skin. His long limbs and slim body were all Phillip's and he took full advantage, touching him everywhere, swallowing him down.

Haunted by Leon's sweet and salty kisses and the heat of his body, Phillip tossed and turned, sweated through his sheets and called out Leon's name into the endless night.

Tired but elated, Phillip was looking forward to seeing Leon as he headed to work. That's why he steeled himself for coming face to face with him again. If he didn't, he might just drag him from behind his desk so he could do unspeakable things to him.

Phillip could just see the two of them rolling around on the office rug, their clothes flying every which way. That couldn't happen. Nothing could happen between them while they were at work.

Working with Leon was going to be very different now, definitely more challenging. Whatever the challenges, Phillip was determined to overcome them and keep himself firmly under control. At work, Phillip's eyes would not be undressing Leon. He would not be imagining him bent over his desk, moaning as Phillip plowed into him.

Aside from that kind of inexcusable lechery, he also didn't want Leon to feel pressured into a serious relationship too quickly. Phillip was monopolizing a lot of his time already, and Leon was so young. Phillip couldn't imagine that he would want to commit too soon. No matter how much he looked forward to being with him again, he wanted to respect Leon's boundaries and not be intrusive or, God forbid, clingy.

On the night Phillip picked for watching the home movies, Leon arrived after dinner. He was loaded down with goodies and dressed casually in a checkered shirt over a t-shirt and jeans. He looked incredibly young and fresh as Phillip greeted him with a kiss. Ant was right there so the kiss was quick and not too deep.

Preoccupied with what Leon brought, Ant wasn't paying any attention to them though. The red bucket Leon was carrying had him curious.

"This is our popcorn bucket," Leon told him.

Seeing that it was empty, Ant wasn't too impressed. He looked up from the empty, red bucket to Leon.

"It's empty now but it will be full later," Leon promised him then he went to the kitchen to unpack the salty and sweet snacks he got.

Ant's eyes were big as he craned his neck to see everything while Leon told him what was on the menu.

"We have caramel popcorn with peanuts, popcorn balls, and of course chocolate covered popcorn." Holding up a bag, he said, "We'll pop this batch fresh and put butter on it."

Ant looked kind of overwhelmed. "I love popcorn!" he said suddenly.

"Good to know since we're buried in it," Phillip said.

They took the snacks to the living room where Phillip had the videos set up and ready to play. He told Leon and Ant about them. "These are some videos of Tony doing magic. When he was in elementary school, Tony fell in love with learning magic tricks. It held his attention for most of a year. Our parents were his captive audience. I was his unwilling assistant." Phillip remembered being roped into participating with threats and bribes, and finally with the only thing that worked – a guilt trip.

"Did he cut you in half?" Leon asked.

"He tried." As Phillip said this, Ant looked at him to make sure he was in one piece.

They all sat down together on the sofa. Ant was between them, but Leon reached over and squeezed Phillip's shoulder. Turning to him, Phillip saw his beautiful, understanding eyes and reassuring smile. Keeping Leon's steadying presence firmly in his mind, Phillip prepared himself for a dive into the past. It would be OK as long as Leon was there to keep him from drowning.

*

Leon came over to Phillip's ready and glad to be of help. On the face of it, it was a fun time. The coffee table was loaded down with every kind of popcorn Leon could get his hands on. Ant was kicking his feet excitedly as they dangled over the edge of the sofa, and Phillip seemed only a little shaky as he started the video.

Still, Leon planned to be watchful in case Phillip needed rescuing. For now he turned his eyes to the TV. On the screen, a curly haired boy, only a few years older than Ant, introduced himself as "Tony, the Master of Magic, Morton!" He introduced the preteen Phillip as his lowly assistant. The thinner, younger version of Phillip wore a put-upon look on his face. Seeing him so innocent and unprepared, Leon hated to think of all the suffering that was in store for him, for both of those boys.

After Phillip was forced to take a bow, there was a round of applause then Tony performed some magic. He made various things disappear mostly by

throwing them behind his back or dropping them then kicking them under the couch. He also made Phillip disappear. That involved Phillip ducking and hiding behind the couch while Tony practiced some misdirection, and their mother yelled to mind the lamp when it almost got knocked over.

Ant was on the edge of his seat, watching intently. Leon wasn't sure if he knew what was supposed to happen. He did join in and clapped along with Phillip's parents after each trick.

"That's your grandma and grandpa," Phillip told him.

Ant watched them with wonder. He raised his hand halfway like he wanted to wave at them. "Can we go visit them like we visit Gran-gran and Bernie?"

"No. Grandma and Grandpa are gone just like your mom and dad," Phillip told him in a tight voice.

"Oh, no," Ant said and looked at Phillip sadly.

Phillip hugged him then drew his attention to the TV screen. It was time for Tony to juggle some apples.

"He's throwing apples," Ant said as the apples flew into the air.

"He's juggling apples," Phillip corrected him just as Tony dropped one. Then another one slipped from his hand and hit his lowly assistant. "OK, now he's throwing them."

"He messed up! He messed up!" And said excitedly and laughed. Then he turned to Phillip and said, "It's funny when he messes up."

"Sure it is."

"That's my dad. He's funny," Ant said to Leon.

Leon hugged him then told him, "Go on and give your Uncle Phillip another hug."

Phillip hugged Ant and kissed his hair.

"He would have loved you," Phillip said and smiled at Ant sadly.

Leon looked at the TV. Phillip's brother was still goofing around with the apples. His mom was laughing. His dad was telling Phillip to duck. His whole family was there, and all of them were gone now.

Watching the images of Phillip's smiling parents and his little brother, Leon tried to imagine growing up like that, surrounded by love. Then he thought about how terrible it must be to lose a family like that.

He looked over at Phillip and their eyes met. Phillip blinked back tears but he held the pain in check. Leon could see the effort it took, but Phillip did it for Ant's sake. He would do anything to keep Ant happy and to give him the kind of life he once had, in the heart of a close and loving family.

"Let's get apples," Ant said, inspired by the mayhem he saw on the screen.

"I'm betting he doesn't mean for eating," Leon guessed. Seeing that the video was over and that Phillip wasn't up to seeing any more, Leon grabbed a handful of popcorn. "Now let's do a magic trick and make this popcorn disappear."

Chapter 28

After Ant was in bed, Leon helped Phillip hunt down all the stray popcorn. Somehow Phillip even ended up with a piece of popcorn in his shirt collar. After fishing it out, Leon threw it in the air and caught it in his mouth.

"That's probably how it ended up there in the first place," Phillip said.

Ant had tried that trick, and also juggling popcorn, but he was better at catching it in his curly hair and Leon's too. Now he and Phillip were left to clean up.

Leon wasn't sure how late he was supposed to stay so he watched for a hint from Phillip. He didn't seem in a rush to show him the door. Occasionally, he caught a look from Phillip that had a hint of come hither. Or maybe that was just in Leon's imagination. Then he noticed a different expression wash over Phillip's face as he stared off at nothing.

"It kills me that Ant will never know Tony, how crazy he was, how much fun. And he won't get to know his grandparents either." Philip barely got the words out. He sat down on the sofa heavily, and Leon sat down next to him and took hold of his hand. Phillip's fingers entwined with his. "That hits me over and over again. And it always will, I think. As Ant grows up, every milestone will bring back the same pain."

"He has you. And you are a good uncle and a good brother. At the very least, Ant will get to know his dad through you and his grandparents too," Leon told him.

"I'll do my best," Phillip said and squeezed his hand. They shared a close, quiet moment until Phillip suddenly pulled Leon into a tight embrace. "Thank you," he said with an impassioned whisper in his ear.

Leon didn't say anything, he just sighed against Phillip's shoulder. Slowly, Leon turned his face to Phillip, inviting a kiss if he was up for that. Taking the invitation, Phillip gripped him harder and kissed him so deeply and for so long that Leon didn't think he would ever recover.

The kiss tore through him as his heart thundered. He could stay in this moment forever with that kiss stealing every breath and every thought from him. He had never met a man who turned him on like this or who made him want to spend forever in his arms.

As Leon's hands clawed Phillip's body, wanting to rip through his clothes, he forgot to hang on. They overbalanced and fell to the floor. That didn't even slow them down. Leon landed on top of Phillip but didn't stay there for long. Phillip rolled them over and pressed Leon into the floor with a hard kiss. He pinned Leon's hands over his head and kissed his neck.

There it was again. Leon felt trapped. A panicky feeling mixed with desire. Phillip's hard body was too tempting. Desire won out, crushing the fear and Leon moaned.

That never happened with anyone else. At the first intimate touch from any other man, a wall of fear went up, and then it seemed like that's all there was

in the world. The panic always stayed strong and robbed him of pleasure – but not with Phillip's mouth at his pulse point, his muscular chest against Leon's so that he could feel the drumbeat of his heart.

Only Phillip could break through. Leon pushed back panic and gave himself up to the weight and power of Phillip's body on top of him. Breathing hard, Leon wrapped himself around Phillip. His arms and legs pulling him closer, he buried his face in the crook of Phillip's neck and moaned into his hot skin.

"Got carried away," Phillip panted like he only now realized where they were. He pulled back a little and stared down at Leon with eyes glazed with lust.

Knowing that nothing much could happen right there in the middle of the living room, Philip helped Leon up off the floor and pulled him to his bedroom. On the way there, Leon tried not to dwell on what he had in mind. He wanted and needed Phillip. That was all that mattered.

Phillip shut the door by pinning Leon against it. Leon was hungry for his kiss and for his cock, but Phillip only teased him. Holding him still with a firm grip on his arms, he barely grazed Leon's jaw with his lips before letting them glide down the side of his neck.

The slow seduction didn't last. Phillip's hands groped through his clothes, seeking the heat of his naked flesh.

As Phillip pulled him toward his bed, Leon still wasn't sure what they would be doing. The uncertainty threatened to turn into fear, but Phillip's mouth was on his, like a reminder of what he stood to lose.

He was more afraid of never feeling Phillip's kiss or his touch. He had to have this. Leon gave himself up to it – to the hurried way Phillip stripped him and the rough groping between wet kisses. Then there was the feeling of Phillip's cool sheets against his bare skin and Phillip's mouth enveloping his cock.

After they were done pleasing each other, they sat against Phillip's headboard. Leon had his legs over Phillip's and his head on his shoulder. Phillip was stroking his hair and his naked thigh. Leon never wanted to move, but he knew it was still too soon to stay the night. He pushed himself off the bed and to his feet with a groan and started picking up his clothes from the bedroom floor.

"Already?" Phillip said regretfully, but then he got up too and pulled on his pants and shirt so he would be decent when he walked Leon to the door.

They walked slowly, arms around one another. At the door, Leon tried to kiss Phillip goodbye, but the kiss lingered like it would never end. Leon pushed away from him with a grunt. He hated the thought of leaving Phillip.

"Better go so I can be fresh and rested tomorrow for another round of pretending that I'm not dating my boss," Leon said to try and talk himself into going through that door.

"Are we dating?" Phillip asked coyly.

"No. We're just very, very friendly," Leon said and to demonstrate, he went to Phillip and pressed up against him.

"This seems like more than dating," Phillip said and he smiled that disarming smile Leon had seen him wear only since Ant came into his life.

"I wouldn't know. What I know about dating I learned mostly by watching from the sidelines," Leon said. It was only a hint of what he wanted to say. He wasn't sure how to tell Phillip about his very limited experience. "To be fair, I should tell you. I haven't just been avoiding relationships. I've been avoiding sex."

"Oh," Phillip said and a look of grim understanding washed over his face. "I'm sorry. When we..." Phillip started to say, pointing back toward his bedroom.

"That was good. Amazing. But whenever I think about actually having sex, bad memories come flooding back. I've exchanged an unenthusiastic blowjob or two, but anything beyond that and I freeze up."

Phillip shook his head and looked kind of stricken.

"It's different with you," Leon said to reassure him. "I've been trying to get out there since I moved to Easton, but I took it pretty slowly. Maybe too slowly. I should have told you before, but I didn't want to admit it. I didn't know if you would want to take a chance on a guy like me."

"A guy like you? You're wonderful," Phillip said earnestly and took his face in his hands.

"I don't know about that. But dating my boss – I'm aiming high in my first serious dating attempt," Leon said, wanting to lighten the mood.

"So far so good," Phillip told him with a smile and took him in his arms lightly.

"For a long time, I didn't think any kind of real relationship was in the cards for me. I've just been trying to train myself not to be afraid of sex. Growing up, I never witnessed a good relationship with my own eyes. I got stuck living with the choices my parents made and did the only thing I could – I retreated into a shell, into books. My mother's mistakes taught me too well that the next guy wasn't my salvation. But here you are." Gazing deep into Phillip's eyes, Leon lost himself in them but also found himself.

Chapter 29

Once Leon was gone, Phillip was consumed by thoughts of him and what he had told him. He walked through the darkened apartment to check on Ant then back to his bedroom. Only one lamp was on and he switched it off as he dropped into his bed, still dressed. He rubbed his face against the pillow and gripped the sheets in his fist.

Watching Leon go, Phillip wondered if he would always have this tightness in his chest and worry that he would escape his hold and leave him like the others did. He wanted Leon to turn and tell him that he wasn't going away. Otherwise this ache would never ease up. At every moment Leon wasn't with him, he feared losing him.

In his turbulent state of mind, he couldn't imagine sleeping. He lay awake with Leon's scent all around him, keeping him company. Phillip closed his eyes so he could see Leon again maybe more clearly now that he knew that the abuse from his past still affected him.

He had been so eager, even desperate for Leon that he might have missed some sign from him to slow down. Thinking back, he only remembered Leon returning every kiss and moaning with pleasure. He had memorized it all – from the feel of the soft cotton boxers Leon wore the first time he undressed him to the look in his eyes which said, "yes, please" louder than any words.

How could he be sure? Tonight he had lost his head. It happened back on the sofa and later with Leon in the dark of his bedroom. He couldn't wait to strip him naked, taste him, make him his own again. Phillip had never experienced a need that was so blinding that it obliterated every obstacle in its path.

Still he should have been more mindful of the scars from Leon's past. It was too easy to get carried away as his desire burned him up from the inside, but that was no excuse. Leon deserved better.

In the morning, as he drove to the office, Phillip planned to be at his most professional and give Leon some breathing room. He didn't want Leon to feel uncomfortable or pressured into taking things further before he was ready just because it was what Phillip wanted. Though it had become a habit, Phillip was determined not to make any personal requests of him. He wanted to show Leon that he would let him set the pace in their relationship.

When Phillip arrived at the office, Leon gave him a restrained smile from behind his desk, then launched straight into business. After last night, Leon's frosty attitude caught him off guard. Taking his cue from him, Phillip stayed on task and didn't even throw one stray look or smile his way.

As the day wore on, Phillip looked past his own fears and noticed that Leon seemed gloomy. Worried that his presence was wearing on him, Phillip interacted with him only when absolutely necessary. That didn't seem to help. Leon only appeared more somber the next time he saw him.

The longer Leon's standoffish attitude lasted, the more it chilled him. The message Leon was sending could only mean one thing. But it couldn't be over already. Things had only just started. Phillip told himself he was overreacting and tried to stay calm.

Close to lunchtime, Phillip decided to speak to him about what was bothering him and address any issues between them. He was surprised when Leon came into his office and confronted him about his own mood. "So what's going on with you?" Leon demanded. "You were OK when you got here, but it's been downhill ever since."

"It's nothing," Phillip said, not wanting to reveal how he felt, though apparently he had been doing that all day without realizing it. He moved on to what he wanted to say, "I want to talk to you about where things stand."

Leon's expression changed from concerned to very grim. "Sounds serious. Should I be packing up to move to a desk down the hall?"

"What?" Phillip asked. "Where is this coming from?"

"From you and your attitude. I'm just preparing myself for the worst. I know you wouldn't fire me. My guess is that you're going to transfer me."

Phillip denied it immediately. "I'm not transferring you. Do you want a transfer?"

"Me? No. I thought maybe you decided I wasn't worth the trouble with all my dumb baggage and inexperience."

"How could you think that?" Phillip asked, appalled.

"Because of the way you've been acting all day. So what's the deadly serious talk supposed to be about then?" Leon asked, still frowning.

"I just wanted to assure you that things between us at work would be professional. I know I ask a lot of you, but I wanted you to know that I wouldn't impose on you or pressure you," Phillip told him.

The look on Leon's face brightened. "That's what I was trying to do – prove to you that I could behave myself at work. That's why I've been super-professional all day. I was demonstrating my awesome self-control."

"Oh. I thought you were sending me a message to back off," Phillip admitted.

"No way. I wanted to show you I wouldn't embarrass you at the office. That I could keep it cool and not jump you as soon as you walked through the door, but I guess I kind of overshot the mark," Leon said with a sheepish grin.

"You could never embarrass me," Phillip assured him.

"Don't you remember what happened with Thompson?"

"No," Phillip lied.

Leon laughed. "I just want to keep you and this job at all costs."

"Really? I got the impression that you found your job painfully boring."

"This job guarantees that I'll see you. Five days out of seven, I know where you'll be," Leon said. "So my job is safe and we're good now?" Leon still seemed a little unsure about where they stood.

Phillip decided to make himself clear. "I value you as an employee, but I also want you in my life. Between the two of us, I'm sure we can figure out how to balance those two things."

Leon only stared at him for about a minute. "Umm. Could you put that less romantically?"

Phillip chuckled. "Knowing me, yes, I probably could. I'm used to more pragmatic relationships. I don't know what to do when someone takes my breath away and turns me inside out with every look."

For a moment Leon was taken aback, and Phillip was worried that he said too much.

Looking a little wide-eyed, Leon swallowed before he spoke. "That's more like it," he said in a whisper, and gave Phillip a lascivious grin.

While they gazed at each other, Phillip wished he could take Leon in his arms and show him how he felt. Leon walked away just in time to keep Phillip from doing anything stupid and wildly inappropriate. Leon went back to his desk to act professional but still sent an occasional smile Phillip's way.

Chapter 30

Later in the day Phillip went over to his desk. Seeing him lingering there, Leon looked at him expectantly out of the corner of his eye.

"Since we're on such good terms, I have a treat for you," Phillip said. "How would you like to visit a nursing home?"

Leon faced him with a wry look. Then he asked, "Is this your version of 'Come and meet the family'?"

"You already met Lilly, but I guess it is, kind of. And it's only fair since you've been the subject of so much talk over there," Phillip told him.

"What? Me? Why?"

"Ant has been talking you up, and I might have found a few nice things to say as well. Now I want to show you off. Mainly I just don't want to go without seeing you after I leave work, so any excuse will do."

"OK, then I'm in," Leon said good-naturedly.

As always, Ant was thrilled that Leon was joining them. He was as addicted to him as Phillip was. First they had to stop to buy gifts including one from Leon. Leon remembered that Lilly liked flowers so he wanted some small, potted plants. That's what they got after talking Ant out of buying all the biggest ones. He wanted to turn Lilly's room at the nursing home into a jungle. He eventually settled for a hyacinth to go with the assortment of begonias and chrysanthemums in pretty planters.

When they arrived at Ivy Gate with their tray of flowers plus the hyacinth that Ant carried all by himself, they made for quite a sight. All eyes were on them as they went through the grounds. Lilly and Bernie were meeting them at the benches by the fountain, but they hadn't arrived yet. That gave the other old ladies a chance to swarm so they could admire the plants they bought. They also admired Leon and cooed over Ant. He was a familiar sight at the nursing home, but they never got enough of him.

Ant was the first to spot Lilly and Bernie when they slowly made their way over to them. As he ran to greet them, Phillip followed him more slowly, carrying the tray with the plants, all of them in full bloom. Meanwhile, Leon was waylaid by some persistent old ladies. Penned in by walkers on every side, he had a little trouble getting away.

"We starting a nursery?" Bernie asked when she saw their gifts.

Phillip had called ahead to let them know to expect an extra visitor. For a minute, Bernie looked like she was going to ask where he was. Then she spotted him. While Lilly was fussing over Ant and his hyacinth, Bernie was pointedly staring at Leon as he patiently listened to an old lady lecture him on plant care.

"Is that your Leon? You know how to pick 'em. And he must be a good one

if our Ant likes him," Bernie said.

Just then Leon turned around and smiled. Phillip felt his heart start beating faster. It was amazing how Leon's presence brightened his day, how the flash of his eyes could transform a moment. No man had ever made him feel like that before.

At first Phillip didn't recognized the feeling. But as his heart kept drumming in his ears, he knew he was in love. For a while he didn't hear anything that Bernie and Lilly said to him until Ant went over to rescue Leon. Taking him by the hand Ant brought him over and made formal introductions.

"It's Leon! It's Leon!" he yelled and jumped in place, happy that all his favorite people were finally meeting.

As Bernie shook hands with Leon, she winked at Phillip. He knew to expect it and sighed in resignation.

"Isn't this a treat," Lilly said and smiled at Leon, her blue eyes twinkling at him from behind her glasses.

"Look at him. I'd say he's a treat and a half," Bernie said. "Between him and Ant's handsome uncle, I wouldn't be able to choose."

"Like anybody is asking you to choose," Lilly said to her.

"In my younger days I could have had my pick, or with a few drinks in me, I might have taken 'em both on," Bernie claimed to everyone's horror.

Lilly quickly covered Ant's ears, not that he could understand any of that.

"Is there fighting?" Ant asked, confused.

"No," Leon told him. "Bernie just wants to make me her boyfriend."

Ant's ears were still covered so he didn't hear that. To make sure he didn't hear anything else Bernie might say, Lilly asked for his help taking the potted plants to their room. "We'll set them up right on the windowsill, make them nice and cozy."

"You go on," Bernie said to Phillip since he was still standing there, holding the tray with plants. "I want to have a chat with this one." She pointed at Leon and gave him a lopsided grin.

Hearing her, Lilly turned back. "You don't have to have a audience with her. She isn't the queen of anything," she said to Leon.

Bernie waved her off. "You got those two. I'm keeping this one," she said of Leon.

"Is Leon in trouble?" Ant asked as they walked away.

"Nothing to worry about. I'll give him back good as new," Bernie promised.

Ant was satisfied with that, but Phillip felt bad leaving Leon to her mercy. He wasn't exactly given a choice, so all he could do was give Leon an encouraging smile as he left.

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Leon wanted to laugh at Phillip's parting look of commiseration, but as he turned back to Bernie, he got a little worried. She was white-haired,

grandmotherly, and kind of scary now that he was left alone with her.

"I don't know about inside, but this place doesn't seem so bad," Leon said to make conversation. He had noticed that the grounds were huge and well maintained. Plus all the old people he saw so far seemed even too sprightly.

"You can say the same thing about some people," Bernie said, but she had no complaints about Ivy Gate. "It's thanks to your Phillip that I'm here with Lilly."

"He is something. There isn't anything he wouldn't do for Ant."

Bernie nodded. "I was a little worried when Ant went to live with his uncle, that he and Lilly would lose touch. But he's here all the time, and there is no doubt in my mind that Ant is a happy boy. I don't see that pinched and worried look he used to get whenever Lilly wasn't feeling well."

Leon remembered the look. He had seen it on that little boy who was waiting on the steps for his Gran-gran to come back, but maybe he was waiting for more than that – the same way Leon had waited and waited. Except in his case, no one came to sit next to him and to say, "I'm here now. Everything is going to be all right."

Now Leon smiled to himself thinking of how Ant and Phillip sat together on the concrete steps of that rundown apartment building. That day, he had seen a wonderful thing happen. "Having someone who is devoted to him, would do anything for him – that's everything to a helpless little kid," Leon said.

"Hmm." Bernie gave him a knowing, squinty-eyed look. "Someone is talking about himself now."

"Oh, was I? Sorry. I do that sometimes, or a lot. I didn't have it so good," Leon admitted.

"You got a hard luck story?"

"Not one I want to share, but it does make me appreciate Phillip." Leon hoped he didn't sound rude, but he only had the urge to spill everything and lay himself bare when he was with Phillip.

"Ant seems fond of you."

"And I'm very fond of him."

Bernie narrowed her eyes at him.

"What are you worried about?" Leon asked her. "That I might come between Phillip and Ant?"

Bernie gave a small shrug. "You might be the kind that makes nice with the child to get in good with the rich daddy."

"Do you think I am?"

"Not so as I can tell," she said noncommittally.

"Don't know if my word means anything, but I'll tell you anyway. I would never do anything to hurt Ant or Phillip or anyone they care about."

"You could also tell me to butt out. I'm not even family," Bernie pointed out.

Leon smiled and shook his head. Telling off Bernie – sure, that would go well. "You're butting in because you care, and I know what that's worth," Leon said and his smile turned sad. If only someone had taken an interest in

the men that went in and out of his mother's life when he was a kid. "That's why I want Ant to have everything I never had. And that's what Phillip brings to his life."

"And yours too," Bernie added.

"Stop being right about everything, Bernie," Leon said with a grin.

"I got all this hard earned wisdom. What else am I gonna do with it?"

"Is she bragging on herself again?" Lilly asked, overhearing what her friend said as she and Phillip brought Ant over to them.

"She's always sneaking up on me on my bad side," Bernie complained, twisting around awkwardly to look up at her friend.

"You don't have a bad side," Phillip told her gallantly. "You're looking better all the time."

"It's no wonder, the way they work me over in this place," Bernie said then pointed at Lilly accusingly. "And this one won't leave me be until I've done my exercises."

Listening to their bickering, Leon smiled then he noticed Phillip doing the same thing. It was good to see that even so late in life their friendship was going strong, and Phillip must have felt that way too. Of course now he and Phillip were just staring at each other and grinning and it was just a matter of time before Bernie started in on them.

"That was a good time. Thanks for inviting me," Leon said to Phillip as the two of them walked to his car and Ant ran ahead of them.

Phillip didn't take him at his word though. "I'm sure the visit to a nursing home is the highlight of your day."

"Sure it is. Why not?"

"Really?" Phillip turned to him with a skeptical look as they neared his car.

When they stopped where the grassy area turned into a parking lot, Leon explained himself. "It was nice to see that, the way everybody loves each other, everybody cares."

"That is nice," Phillip said and he didn't take his eyes off Leon.

Lost in his gaze, Leon forgot where they were. The air shimmered with the golds of the setting sun and the cicadas sang in the grass. Ant was looking at different license plates, trying to decipher them. "I know you," he would say when he saw a letter or a number he recognized.

"I know you," Leon repeated the words to himself. But he actually wanted to say them to Phillip. "You're the one I've been waiting for."

Phillip was a promise being fulfilled, a promise from long ago that a voice whispered just loud enough for his heart to hear and stay strong.

Chapter 31

Every morning, no matter how early it was, Phillip knew where he would find Ant – in front of the aquarium saying good morning to Bee and Ruby. He even tried to use them as an excuse not to brush his teeth.

"Bee and Ruby don't have to."

Phillip didn't have an argument for that, other than the obvious – "They're fish."

This morning, something caught his eye as he passed the fish tank on his way to get his coffee. He went closer to see what was floating there.

Going into the kitchen where Ant was eating cereal, Phillip asked him, "Ant, did you put anything strange in the fish tank?"

Ant denied it with a simple "No."

Phillip got more specific. "Did you drop some playing cards in the fish tank?"

"Yes," Ant admitted cheerfully. "I was teaching them."

"Aha," Phillip said as he rolled up his shirtsleeve and got ready to go fishing. Right after that Ant was getting a lecture about dropping foreign objects in the aquarium.

As he was getting Ant ready for preschool, or trying to, Phillip wondered about something that happened at the nursing home. He was helping Ant get into his clothes and he asked him about it. "When your Gran-gran covered your ears, why did you ask if there was fighting?"

"Gran-gran told me to plug my ears when her and my mommy fighted. Gran-gran didn't want my mommy to go away so much, but she did," Ant said and he looked down at the floor sadly.

"I see. Sometimes even when people love each other they fight," Phillip told him.

Ant didn't look too sure about that.

Phillip tried again. "The two of us fight when it's time for you to brush your teeth, eat your veggies, and when you have to go to bed."

"Noo," Ant said as he stuck his legs into a tiny pair of jeans.

"We only fight a little, but you're still my little Ant-man. My superhero."

"Ant-man!" Ant said and raised his arms in the air. Phillip took the opportunity to pull a t-shirt over his head.

"Yes. You saved me from being lonely and you made Leon like me," Phillip said once Ant's curly head emerged from inside the t-shirt.

"I love Leon," Ant said while showing no interest in putting on his socks and shoes.

"Me too," Phillip admitted. Maybe some time soon, he might let Leon know as well. "Do you know who else I love?"

Ant gave a small shrug and looked shy.

"You." Phillip told him and gave him a hug. "I love you."

"I love you too, Uncle Phillip," Ant said and wrapped his arms around his neck tightly.

That afternoon after he dropped off Ant at daycare, Phillip was having a late lunch with Ken so they could catch up. Ken had threatened to bring him lunch at the office, but Phillip didn't want that. He was planning to talk to him about Leon, and he wasn't sure how his best friend would react to the news. Since things with Leon had already progressed so far that the word love kept coming into his head whenever Phillip thought of him, it was past time to come clean with Ken.

They were meeting at Trevor's, which was close to the office, had quick service and fried ravioli that Ken couldn't resist. The place was full of people on their lunch break. Talk of business drifted to Phillip as he grabbed a table and waited. Ken joined him a few minutes later.

"A guy was clogging up the sidewalk, walking three dogs with his shirt off. It wasn't a pretty sight. The guy, I mean. The dogs were fine," Ken said as he sat down with a loud huff.

Not wanting to drag things out, Phillip told him about Leon while they waited for their food to arrive.

"Your assistant, really, Phillip?" Ken stopped just short of rolling his eyes.

"Yes, really," Phillip told him gruffly to let him know where he stood on Ken's negative attitude on this particular subject.

That didn't keep Ken from being Ken. "What has happened to you? Your goal has always been to date guys just as established and boring as you, except for me of course."

"I thought you were worried that my love life was going extinct," Phillip reminded him.

"This is worse," Ken said harshly while leaning across the table. "You're still grieving. You are a sitting duck. You're in no shape to get mixed up with this guy and get your heart broken. I can't even believe you would risk it. He's pretty, but he's not that pretty."

"Yes, he is, and he's a lot more than that. Leon is everything I want. I just hope he doesn't get sick of me and leave like all the others, including you," Phillip told him, not that anything he said made a dent in Ken's disapproval.

"You take everything too seriously, but don't kid yourself. It's a fling."

Even if Ken didn't take his relationship with Leon seriously, Phillip did. "I am sure of Leon and how I feel about him."

Ken opened his mouth just in time to start stuffing it with food. The waitress had set their order in front of them, and for a few seconds Ken was busy chewing. Then he was back at it. "You already complicated your life with a kid. Is this really the time to get in deep with this guy and fuck up your work situation on top of it? You're courting a lawsuit. I never pictured you as the

kind to chase his secretary around the desk."

"You can stop picturing that right now," Phillip ordered him.

Ken only smirked meanly. "Not very dignified, is it? Not very you. I blame Ant for this."

Phillip wasn't sure he heard him right. "Ant?"

Ken only nodded, busy with his next bite. Then he explained. "It's a well known fact that spending too much time with kids rots your brain. After Nancy had the twins, she reverted to pure baby talk. It was all poop and spit up. Her IQ dropped into the double digits. I don't think it will ever recover."

"That's nice. Now that you've insulted me, Leon and your sister, is there anyone else you would like to take a shot at?"

"You think I'm done with you?" Ken asked and threatened him with a ravioli on a fork. "You are trying to recreate the family you lost, and that's just going to make you blind to who this guy is."

"I think what I have with Ant and Leon is worth it," Phillip stated simply. Even if Ken couldn't see it, Phillip knew they were at the start of something amazing.

"What do you think you have? You've had guys in your bed, but have you ever really been with anyone? Certainly not with me. You were never there. You were always looking off somewhere far away, searching for what you lost."

Phillip didn't argue with him about that. "Sorry."

Ken grimaced at him. "Ugh. Don't be nice about it. I still need to hate you a little. I felt like I barely existed, reduced to throwing temper tantrums to get your attention."

"Should I say sorry again?" Phillip offered.

"No. But what will happen when your assistant has had enough of it and wants to get back at you?" Ken looked at him sharply.

"Leon?" Phillip couldn't imagine Leon turning vindictive. "I'll just have to make sure I do right by him."

"So for him, you'll be a new man?" Ken's disbelief was obvious.

"Yes."

"You piss me off so much. I can't believe I have to work this hard to protect you from yourself."

"I thought you were protecting me from Leon."

"It's the same thing."

"Thank you for trying. I know good friends aren't the people who tell you only what you want to hear," Phillip said in a conciliatory tone, but Ken wasn't having any of it.

"Yes, good friends love to waste their breath on incurable romantics."

Phillip was surprised to be called that. "If anything, I thought I was overly rational."

"Your heart is too soft even in business. Do you know what kind of money you would be raking in if it wasn't for your dumb ethics?"

"I make plenty."

Ken looked appalled at his words. "No true businessman would ever say that."

"I'm not sure if you think too much of me or too little."

"Me either," Ken said and sighed.

Phillip eyed him. "Give me a rough estimate. How much of this is pure jealousy?"

Ken was ready with the numbers. "Thirty percent jealousy, sixty percent real concern and ten percent just letting my inner bitch off the leash for a little exercise."

"Ten percent seems a bit low for that last one," Phillip said with a smile. "And just so you know, two old ladies gave their approval."

"Are you telling me I'm a bigger stick in the mud than two old ladies and – God help me – you?" Ken asked, horrified mostly by that last comparison.

"Yes."

"I worry about you," Ken said with a sincere, if somewhat hopeless, look of concern. "You're all alone in the world. Someone has to take the place of your hectoring mother."

Phillip didn't see it. "You? You don't sound anything like my mother. She was a very positive person and our biggest cheerleader."

"That's why you never got to sharpen your fangs and claws. That's what mothers are for, to build up your defenses, make you strong through nagging and suffering."

"If you say so," Phillip said as he paid the check.

Once he and Ken parted ways, Phillip walked to his office. He felt as if he was playing catch-up with his own emotions while they ran ahead of him. When talking to Ken, he had sounded so sure of Leon. Of course he loved Leon and he never had a moment of mistrust toward him. Why else would he risk letting him into his life with Ant? He just didn't know how to deal with what he felt or how to tell him. And Ant said it so easily. "I love Leon."

Even without previous experience saying the words, Phillip was pretty sure he shouldn't just blurt it out like that. Plus there was a painful knot of fear inside him that he couldn't deny. The talk with Ken had put it there and sobered him a little. Not that he doubted Leon even for a minute, but what if he didn't feel the same way or if Phillip was rushing and pressuring him – exactly what he promised himself he wouldn't do.

No matter how powerful his yearnings had grown, he needed to be sensible about this. Usually being sensible was second nature to him, but not with Leon. Everything about him went straight to Phillip's heart.

Chapter 32

After the ordeal of defending his relationship with Leon against Ken and wrestling with his own feelings, Phillip was exhausted. By the time he got to the office and saw Leon, he was ready to make plans for tonight. For some reason, Phillip felt up for that. Maybe it was being greeted by Leon's smiling face. He just wanted to keep looking at him and listening to his deep, soft voice even if all he was telling him was that he had racked up more appointments for tomorrow.

"Let's do something tonight," Phillip told him.

Leon gave him a happy grin. "OK, but it's about time I played host. Want to see my tiny, cramped, crappy apartment?"

"More than anything."

When he went to get Ant and brought him to the office, Leon told him about their plans.

"You and your uncle are coming over to my place. You're going to be my guests for a change."

"Is it gonna be a party?" Ant asked eagerly.

"Sure. But just the three of us and some chocolate covered potato chips and chocolate covered pretzels. How does that sound?" Leon said. The big smile on Ant's face told them that he couldn't wait.

Once they left work, Leon was going shopping and Phillip and Ant were meeting him at his place. That gave Phillip a chance to grab a nice bottle of wine so they wouldn't show up empty handed. He refused to acknowledge the fact that Leon couldn't legally drink it. He couldn't possibly be dating someone who wasn't old enough to drink, not to mention trusting his future, his heart, and his and Ant's happiness to him. The main thing was not to let Ken know how old Leon was. He would never hear the end of it.

Leon's apartment building had a brown brick facade and very little parking. Ant got excited when he spotted Leon's red car parked against the curb in front, but they had to circle the block a few times before they could find a parking spot.

After a spot opened up, they went up the block, into a dimly lit lobby and then up to the sixth floor. The elevator lurched a bit too much for Phillip's liking, but Ant enjoyed the ride. In front of Leon's door, he asked to hold the wine bottle.

"We'll hold it together," Phillip said to prevent a disaster on Leon's doorstep.

Opening the door wide, Leon welcomed them and the bottle of wine. Behind him, Phillip spotted other guests. He looked at Leon questioningly.

"They stopped by, heard me say the word party, and I couldn't get rid of them," he announced loudly while his friends protested weakly.

They appeared to be a couple based on the way they were standing close together. Or more than that, Phillip realized when he spotted their wedding

rings. As he led the way, Leon gave Phillip a look to make sure that the extra guests were OK with him. Phillip smiled to reassure him that it was.

He was curious about Leon's friends. This was a welcome opportunity to get to know them. He didn't expect them to be older than both him and Leon though. The two men were in their forties and one was slightly balding. That was Lenny, a lanky guy with a big smile. Mike was stocky, dark and wore glasses.

"We finally get to meet the famous Ant and Leon's handsome boss," Lenny said as Leon made introductions.

Leon stepped in as soon as he heard him. "For the record, I never called you that," he said to Phillip. "I said gorgeous."

"I'm a CPA and Lenny runs a little craft store," Mike said and shook his hand.

"Yes, the little shop of horrors," Lenny called it.

"Ant would like it," Leon said.

"Then maybe we can go and visit," Phillip suggested.

Lenny whipped out a business card and handed it to Ant. Without being able to read one word, Ant looked at it with wonder and asked if he could keep it.

"That's what they're for."

"Lenny and Mike like parties too," Leon said to Ant.

"Let's party!" Mike agreed and raised a glass of something on ice.

"We have five! We have five for the party," Ant said having finished a painstaking head count.

"A good number, huh?" Leon said as Lenny gazed at Ant with adoration.

"A born accountant," Mike praised him.

Lenny agreed. "He's hired. Sorry, honey," he said to his husband, who must have been his actual accountant.

While Ant was the center of attention, Phillip looked around the apartment. There was an open door that showed a narrow bed in a very small room. Phillip averted his eyes from it before his imagination took over.

The living room was small with a wide window facing another building across the alley. Under the window was a couch with sunken cushions. Phillip imagined curling up on it with Leon, letting his hands wander, not to mention his overactive imagination. Not wanting to let indecent thoughts take over, he turned away from there too.

From what Leon told him, Phillip knew there would be a lot of books somewhere but he didn't expect this monstrosity of a makeshift shelving system. Two small particleboard shelves were sagging under a wire shelf that sat on top of them. Books were crammed in every which way. Seeing what Phillip was looking at, Ant went straight for those crazy shelves.

"Don't. You'll start an avalanche," Leon warned him. "Let's go see what's happening in the kitchen."

The kitchen and the living room were really one room. They only had to go

a few feet to see everything Leon had laid out on the minimal counter space. He picked up Ant so he could get a better look. The snacks and finger foods got Ant's approval. Phillip had Ant start with a cream cheese celery stick.

Ant made a face. "It's veggies." He munched on it while Leon showed Phillip his collection of drinking glasses.

"Thrift stores aren't just for books," he said. "Next time I'll pick up some wine glasses. Now do you want your expensive wine in a Hamburglar glass or a Wile E. Coyote glass?"

Ant was looking up at them eagerly, ready to make his choice.

"You get juice in a SpongeBob cup," Leon told him and showed him a bright yellow plastic cup. "I got this one just for you. You're my guest of honor."

Ant accepted the cup and beamed at him.

"We want one of those," Lenny said, pointing at Ant. "Where do we get one?"

"Maybe someone should tell him where babies come from," Mike said.

"I know!" Ant announced. "Babies come from inside mommies."

"Not daddies?" Mike asked. He seemed to be a little bit of a troublemaker at heart.

Ant set him straight. "Daddies can help, but mommies have a special room inside just for babies."

"And how do babies get out of the room," Mike asked while the others tried to shush him.

Ant had the answer. "There's a door."

They all cracked up, but Ant took it well.

"Thank you for telling us," Phillip said. He was the one who came closest to keeping it together in the face of Ant's version of the facts of life. "Who told you about that?" Phillip asked him since it didn't exactly sound like something Lilly would say.

"Bernie told me," Ant said. That made more sense.

Though Ant was the life of the party, they got in some adult conversation too. Phillip heard about how Leon came to be friends with Mike and Lenny.

"I worked at Lenny's craft store for a while," Leon said. Though he had poured wine for the others, he was having a Coke in a classic Pepsi glass.

"That was before I took over the place from my mom," Lenny said. "You should have seen my mom doting on Leon. It was sickening. I had to fire him."

"I quit because you couldn't pay me a living wage," Leon said.

"I can barely pay myself a living wage. I quit my real job to take over the store and fired this one," Lenny said, pointing his glass at Leon. "I didn't need him full time like mom did. Her asthma was hellish at that store with all those bits of fluff and whatever from the craft supplies. But I didn't take over the place just for her sake. My old corporate job was stressing me out like you

wouldn't believe."

Mike confirmed it. "He was shredding so many napkins, we could have opened a confetti store."

As the talk was going on, Phillip and Leon watched Ant inching toward the structurally unsound shelving.

"I'm going to have to rope that off," Leon grumbled. "If you're looking for snacks, they're over here," Leon told Ant and pointed his thumb at the coffee table. "If you're looking for trouble, keep going that way."

At the sound of his voice, Ant jumped. First he looked guilty then conflicted. After a minute, he made his decision and headed for the bookshelf. Leon handed his drink to Phillip and in two long strides, overtook the little trouble seeker. Laughing, he swung Ant up in his arms and spun him around.

"Wrong choice, little dude," he told Ant, who was giggling.

As the hour got late, Ant slept on yet another couch, and the couples danced. Phillip gazed at Leon then nuzzled his neck. Leon turned his head to speak into his ear.

"You're happy," he told Phillip.

Lifting his head, Phillip eyed him questioningly.

Leon answered his silent question, "I was telling you because I wasn't sure you knew."

"I know," he said and kissed Leon. The kiss was just long enough to let Leon know how he felt, but not start something. That would have to wait for after Lenny and Mike left. If they ever did. They struck him as the kind of guests one had to show to the door. Soon enough, that's just what Leon was doing.

Chapter 33

With the other guests gone, Phillip felt free to take Leon in his arms the way he wanted to. They slow danced, more relaxed and intimate now that they didn't have an audience. Leon might have been too relaxed even. His whole body molded against Phillip's.

"I'm working you too hard," Phillip said seeing how sleepy-eyed he was as he rubbed his back.

"Not yet, you aren't," Leon told him wickedly. He took Phillip's hand and led him to his bedroom.

Phillip took one last look at Ant sleeping on the sofa. For his benefit, the lamp by the sofa stayed on as did the kitchen light. Leon's room was completely dark until he reached for the light switch by the door and a small lamp mounted by the headboard came on. Based on its position, Phillip figured it was mainly for reading.

Going in, Phillip saw the single bed and only room enough for one chest of drawers at the foot of the bed. There was a stack of hardcover books under the window that acted as a nightstand.

"I think this used to be a closet once, but the price was right so I'm not complaining," Leon said, quietly shutting the door behind them. As they were standing at the foot of the bed with their arms around each other, Phillip noticed Leon looked him up and down like he was measuring him. "It might be tough when we both try to fit in there."

They both eyed the bed, but Phillip wasn't worried. "We'll manage." He pulled Leon closer against him and slipped a hand under the back of his t-shirt. Feeling Leon's body tense in his arms, he quickly reassured him, "We won't be doing anything too strenuous."

"We better not. I think the walls are made of cardboard." Leon knocked on the wall very lightly, and Phillip heard a hollow sound that was very worrying considering that Ant was on the other side.

"I'll behave," Phillip promised as Leon turned to look into his eyes.

Leon smiled. "I like you when you're being good," he said and leaned in to give him a kiss. "And I like you when you're being bad. You can do no wrong with me," Leon told him in a low, intimate whisper.

For a moment, Phillip basked in the trust he saw in his beautiful eyes. They sat close to each other on Leon's bed, and their knees touched that thin wall. Turning a little sideways, they kissed. Just from that one kiss, Phillip knew that he craved him like a drug. Already he was hard and ready for him. He had to tell himself to slow down.

His groping hands didn't listen and his mouth stayed on Leon's, devouring him. They paused for breath and Leon climbed into his lap. His lips teased Phillip's earlobe. Leon's fingertips dug into his flesh. His curls brushed Phillip's face followed by the rough scrape of his stubble. Phillip pushed his fingers threw his hair and pulled him in for a thorough kiss.

They kissed nonstop so long that he was dizzy with it, and it still wasn't enough.

"I could kiss you forever. Give up everything just to kiss you," Phillip murmured as he kissed Leon's face.

"Then do it," Leon dared him without taking his eyes off Phillip's mouth. His voice was low and dangerous, sending tremors through Phillip's whole body. Then Leon's lips crashed against his.

Leon pushed him back then twisted them around so he was lying on his bed with Phillip on top of him. Phillip grunted at the feel of his long, slim body under him. He ran his hands over him then pulled off his t-shirts and unzipped Leon's fly then his own. Leon was rising toward him then pulling him down on top of him. Barely giving Phillip enough time to take his own button-down shirt off over his head, Leon was grinding against him, hungry for him.

Reaching down between them where their bodies were pressed together hard and hot, he lightly grazed the length of Leon's erection and watched him writhe. Biting his lower lip so no sounds would escape, Leon squirmed until Phillip gave him what he wanted. He slid one hand over Leon's cock, one over his own then he pushed them together and started pumping.

Throwing his head back, arching up, his whole body tight, Leon fought to stifle his sounds of pleasure. He stared up at Phillip with desperate eyes until Phillip's mouth covered his and swallowed his silent moans.

Their soul-melting kiss made Phillip pump harder. Leon was raking his fingers down his back and over his ass, driving him crazy. The bed shook under them but that couldn't be helped.

Losing himself in Leon's eyes, in every harsh breath and shudder, Phillip had to taste him. He leaned down over his cock and sucked him in, drinking him up as he came.

Phillip was close too. Leon kissed him hard and added his hand to Phillip's, cupping his balls and caressing them. His touch was all Phillip needed. Almost forgetting not to let out a sound, he came with a blinding burst of pleasure and collapsed into Leon's arms.

As Phillip's arms tightened around him and they stretched out on his narrow bed, Leon complained, "Too small for two."

Phillip shook his head. "Just right." He didn't need more room. All he needed was Leon.

A little later, they cleaned up, got dressed and got back in bed. In case Ant woke up, they slept with the door open. As usual Phillip didn't sleep much but he was so unbelievably happy.

The next morning, waking up in a strange bed with Leon in his arms was disorienting and wonderful. Later on, coming out of Leon's claustrophobic bathroom, Phillip was faced with quite a scene. Wearing a blue towel around his neck, Leon was standing on the coffee table. Ant had one of Leon's t-shirts tied around his shoulders like a cape.

While running around the coffee table, Ant was yelling, "Ant-man!" At the same time, he was throwing balled up socks at Leon, who only pretended to dodge them. When he caught the socks, Leon lobbed them back a lot more gently.

"What's this?" Phillip asked as he caught a balled up pair of socks that had missed its mark.

"Snowball fight!" Ant announced.

"With socks?"

"Leon's laundry is fun," Ant said as he ran up to Phillip.

"Leon makes everything fun." Phillip swung Ant up into his arms and grinned at Leon.

"We needed props. It's Ant-man vs. Lion-man," Leon said then he jumped off the coffee table and growled at Ant.

Ant responded by giggling bravely.

"Can I be your sidekick?" Phillip asked Ant.

"Yes!"

"What should be my costume?"

Ant looked around and finally handed him a dishtowel.

"Isn't it too small?" Phillip asked.

Ant shook his head. Seeing no way out, Phillip made a headband out of it. He equipped himself with tongs and a spatula, and he was ready to be a sidekick. Looking him over, Leon decided he should be Lobster-man.

"You get to be king of the beasts and I get to be a crustacean?" Phillip groused.

For him playing second or even third fiddle was a familiar predicament. The last time Phillip played superhero, it was with Tony. Back then he was also stuck playing the sidekick even when he and Tony flipped for it.

Phillip never imagined he would be doing it again, especially with Tony's son. Here he was with a striped dishtowel on his head, trying to catch socks with a pair of tongs and a spatula, and in general just looking ridiculous. But it was absolutely worth it. Hearing Ant laugh at him was the sweetest sound in the world.

Chapter 34

A Friday night mini party, then all night in Phillip's arms, followed by a Saturday morning goofing around – Leon couldn't believe this was his life. He was kind of dazed every time he thought about being with Phillip. If anyone had read his tea leaves and predicted this future, the one he was living right now, he would have laughed at them.

But even after Phillip and Ant left, Leon felt he was still wrapped in their warmth. Leon wished they could have spent all day together. Phillip only had time to help Leon with the party dishes. Then he and Ant had to go home and play hosts to Lilly and Bernie, who were coming over for a visit.

After getting a threatening text, Leon went to have lunch with Pavel. Pavel was complaining that he hadn't been invited to the party and making threats of throwing a party of his own and not inviting Leon. Then he added, "But you still have to help me set up and make a few things. And bring a few extra chairs. And stay to help me clean up after." Leon pictured himself with an oversized garbage bag picking up the empties while stepping over Pavel's passed out buddies. Nothing new there.

Their meeting place for lunch was the usual hole in the wall pizza joint, but this time Leon ordered only a salad for himself.

"Is that about your guy?" Pavel said while looking at his lightly dressed Caesar salad scornfully. "He sounds like a salad guy. Katya said he looked like money. Lenny and Mike told me about him too. They were gushing. I was... eh." He shrugged his burly shoulders dismissively.

"That's because you didn't see him, or how hot he is, or how sweet he is!" Leon said, raising his voice.

Pavel motioned with his hands for him to bring it down. "I just don't see you dating a money bag. You need someone young and fun, whose dick goes on for miles."

"His dick goes the distance, believe me."

"Have you two...?" Pavel started to ask.

"No, but we've done plenty," he bragged though he was still stuck on the fence – wanting more and being afraid of what he wanted.

"Good for you. Want a slice?" Pavel asked and held it out to him.

Leon drew back. "Keep that away from me. I'm still trying to erase all evidence that a pizza has ever been near this body. I've doubled up on weight training and I'm taking the stairs at top speed like some stair climbing demon."

"You're rejecting pizza and torturing yourself with exercise? This guy has been a bad influence on you," Pavel concluded. Nothing Leon said about Phillip was winning him over so far.

"Whatever. He's hot, and from now on my body is a temple dedicated to him," Leon said and stabbed at his salad decisively.

Pavel paused his chewing to ask, "Dedicated? Like forever or something?"

Leon wanted to shout "Hell yes!" but decided to scale it back to a "Maybe. We'll see how it goes."

"From what I heard, that Phillip is not too bad, but is he really what you're looking for in a guy?" Pavel wondered.

Leon thought about it. He wasn't all that ambitious when it came to what he wanted in a guy. What was he looking for – someone who would be good to him and faithful. That sounded like Phillip, and on top of that, he set his body and soul on fire. Leon grinned to himself.

"I guess that answers my question," Pavel said seeing his look.

Lost in thoughts of Phillip, Leon hardly even noticed when Pavel shook his head at him.

"Phillip isn't the kind of guy you look for. He's the kind of guy you can't imagine until you meet him or until he drops down from heaven right in front of you."

"I'm eating here," Pavel objected. "Oh, man. I'm sorry I brought it up."

Leon had no remorse. "But you did bring it up and that got me thinking about how wonderful Phillip is. He's so serious and assured and has the biggest heart and is gorgeous on top of that."

"Stop it. I'm warning you."

Leon only laughed. He did sympathize though. Not too long ago he would have strangled anyone who talked about his guy the way he was talking about Phillip. But now, against all odds, Leon had a wonderful guy of his own, and he didn't care if he made Pavel lose his lunch over it.

"Ken is mad at us," Ant announced when Phillip brought him into the office at the end of the school day.

"Ken heard there was a party and he wasn't invited," Phillip explained while he helped Ant take off his backpack.

"That was days ago, ancient history. Why did you even tell him?" Leon asked sourly since he wasn't a Ken fan.

"I didn't. Ant did. He likes talking on my phone. I was driving when Ken called so I let Ant talk to him. And he did," Phillip said with a mildly accusing look at Ant.

"Ant was answering your phone? Are you after my job?" he asked Ant who denied it. Leon turned back to Phillip "Actually Pavel was whining about not being invited to the party too. We should set him up with Ken and they can drive each other crazy like Lenny and Mike do."

"An interesting idea. But I'm afraid I have more bad news," Phillip said while giving Leon a sheepish look. "Ant did more than tell Ken about your party. He invited him to a party of our own. I've decided that means lunch. You are invited too. Ken wants to meet you properly."

"Not rush past my desk and blow me off while I'm trying to announce him?" Leon made a face, but then he relented. "If Ant is throwing a party, I have to show up. And I owe you for putting up with my friends."

"I liked your friends. But Ken is... an acquired taste."

"Still, it's only fair," Leon pointed out.

Phillip didn't agree. "There's nothing fair about spending time with Ken."

"Is he that bad?"

"No. He's a good guy at heart. He's just a little outspoken and overprotective, overbearing."

Leon added one more item to the list. "Obnoxious. I remember what a sweetheart he is, but I can handle it," he assured Phillip. "And my very own best friend wasn't too sure you were the right guy for me."

"Too stuffy and boring," Phillip guessed immediately.

"What does he know," Leon said and ran the back of his hand over Phillip's carefully knotted tie.

Chapter 35

They made arrangements for Leon to come over next Sunday. Before going to Phillip's, Leon spent way too long picking out what to wear while telling himself that he wasn't trying to impress Ken. Ken should be worried about impressing him.

When he arrived, Ken was already there and Ant was excited for him and Leon to meet.

"Leon is a lion, and best friend Ken named the fishes," Ant said.

"You've have Ant-man's endorsement. You might not be such a bad guy after all," Leon said.

Ken squinted at him. "I'm the bitchy best friend. But you can call me Ken." He extended his hand for a firm handshake.

"I'll just call you Kenneth so Phillip here doesn't feel left out," Leon said.

Ken gave him a thin smile and looked at him challengingly. "Kenneth, Ken, whatever, when a cute guy is talking, I'm not really listening. I'm just watching his mouth move and picturing..."

"Ken!" Phillip warned him sharply. Good thing Ant was busy with the fish.

"Did I overstep?" he asked while Phillip stared him down.

The whole thing made Leon wonder if Ken was jealous. He was definitely a better match for Phillip than Leon. He was older and more sophisticated. But from what Leon could tell, Phillip had him firmly boxed in as a friend and nothing more. Too bad for him, but good for Leon. Still, it wouldn't be right to laugh in his face.

Ken looked around with disapproval. "I hardly recognize this place any more. Hell, I hardly recognize Phillip. He isn't himself these days. Lately, he's been taking all these leaps into the unknown, taking crazy risks." Ken pointedly looked Leon up and down.

"Me," Leon guessed.

Ken confirmed it. "As far as I'm concerned you're just a pretty, curly headed trap Phillip has fallen into."

"Ken!" Phillip said again and sort of growled at him. Then he apologized for him to Leon. "Sorry. That's Ken in the protective momma bear mode."

"Can you blame me?" Ken asked. "Phillip is a great guy and I feel like the whole world wants to take advantage of him."

"Not while you are there to protect him," Leon said mocking him a little. But Leon didn't mind seeing how protective Ken was of Phillip. It was only natural. He felt protective toward Phillip himself. Leon caught himself smiling at Phillip adoringly as Ken looked on.

"And Phillip is here to protect you," Ken noted. "Where you are concerned, he's always snarling and barking at me."

"Is that right?" Leon said and grinned at Phillip.

Phillip didn't deny it. He only objected to Ken's choice of words. "I don't bark," he said as he went to the kitchen to pull lunch out of the oven.

"He never did that when I was his boyfriend," Ken said offhandedly once Phillip was gone.

"Wait? What?" Leon said. He glared in the direction of the kitchen then at Ken. "You're an ex. Now I officially hate you."

"Noooo," Ant protested, popping up next to Leon.

Leon reversed his position immediately but only for Ant's benefit. "OK. I don't hate him."

Ant smiled up at him and then at Ken.

"See how sweet he is. He even likes you," Leon said and rifled Ant's hair.

"Who doesn't he like?" Ken said with a shrug.

Ant was ready with an answer. "I don't like Jimmy!"

"Who's that and what did he do?" Ken wanted to know.

"He called me a dummy." Ant furrowed his brow.

"Where is this Jimmy? I'll fight him," Ken said looking around like Jimmy might be hiding behind the sofa.

"Maybe you shouldn't," Leon told Ken archly. "It would be embarrassing if you fought a three-year-old and lost."

"I thought you and I were winning each other over," Ken said with a smirk.

"That was before I knew..." Leon started to say but Ken finished the thought in his own way.

"That I had myself a big, thick, juicy slice of Phillip and ruined him for all other men." His smugness was off the charts.

Leon decided to finish his own sentence. "That you had the bad judgment to let him slip through your greasy fingers."

Ken looked at his perfectly manicured fingers. "Are you sure you don't want to pretend to be all nonchalant about this?" he asked Leon.

"Hell no," Leon told him acidly.

"Uncle Phillip! They're fighting!" Ant tattled on them.

Phillip came out of the kitchen with a look that said, "I can't leave you two alone for one minute." Then he noticed how Leon was looking from him to Ken with murder in his eyes.

"Thank you for not telling him I was your ex," Ken said with a most self-satisfied smirk ever worn by anyone. "I got to see his face when he found out."

"What are best friends for," Phillip said, looking confused.

"For fucking," Leon said under his breath though Ant was busy looking at the food Phillip had set up in the dining room.

"I thought you knew," Phillip said to Leon. "And lunch is ready."

Leon stomped off to the dining room to violently stab the delicious roasted vegetable tart Phillip had made as well as the yellow heirloom tomatoes with vinaigrette dressing and chives.

"Veggies, veggies, veggies," Ant grumbled. He suffered through the tomatoes valiantly, but when it came to the tart, he only ate the crust. He did

hold up his end of the conversation. "I like easy-peasy."

"That's peas and mashed potatoes," Phillip translated while Ken made a face. Food snob.

"Let's play cards," Ant said. Done eating first, he was fidgety at the table. "I played cards with Bernie and Gran-gran. Gran-gran said I was a shark. Ant-man shark!"

"I think only another three-year-old could understand his strange, alien language. What's a Gra-gra?" Ken asked.

"Gran-gran," Leon annunciated. "That's what Ant calls his great-great aunt?

Ant confirmed it. "She's great great." Then he gave Leon credit for his skills. "Leon teached me how to play cards too," he said to Ken.

"He didn't teach you proper grammar, did he?" Ken said and got a warning look from both Leon and Phillip, but he only had eyes for Leon. "That gives me an idea. If Phillip has a deck of cards lying around here somewhere, I might be up for a couple of hands of poker."

Phillip asked Ant. "Do you know where the playing cards are?"

Ant said yes and ran off to find them.

"Is there any chance in hell that we will be playing with a complete deck?" Ken asked.

"Since I had to fish a couple of them out of the aquarium, I can't guarantee anything," Phillip said and Ken rolled his eyes.

Phillip cleared the table to give them room. When Ant came back with the deck of cards, Leon took them from him and started shuffling expertly.

Ken raised an eyebrow. "Maybe one of you guys can finally give me a run for my money."

Leon did more than that. He beat Ken, then beat him again when Ken demanded a rematch. He was just lucky they were playing for Goldfish crackers and not for cash. Leon offered to beat him as many times as he liked, but Ken decided on a cowardly retreat. As Phillip walked him to the door, he gave Leon one last wicked look.

Not feeling too proud of his behavior, Leon was glad to see him leave. While Leon was brooding, Ant was more than happy to eat his winnings. Leon considered it a miracle that he could be even halfway civil to Phillip's ex with everything inside him screaming, "Mine! Mine! Mine!" Faced with a guy who had more experience, who had to have better sex skills, and who had been with Phillip – Leon wanted to kill him.

Who knew he even had this kind of jealousy and possessiveness in him. When it came to Phillip, he just wasn't a sane and reasonable human being.

Chapter 36

As he was doing the lunch dishes, Phillip noticed his weird mood. "Ant did his part, but I know that wasn't as festive as the party with your friends."

"I just have better taste in friends," Leon said while he slouched against the fridge and fumed.

Phillip didn't fail to notice the harshness of his tone. He turned away from the sink to face Leon and invited him to speak up. "Let's hear it," he said as he wiped his hands.

With Ant safely out of earshot, playing in his room, Leon didn't hesitate to unload on Phillip. "Did it just slip your mind that you and Ken used to do it? Because if I was asking you to spend time with one of my nonexistent exes, I'd make sure to mention it."

"I thought I told you about Ken when he first came to the office after you started working for me," Phillip said in a mild tone that was nothing like Leon's.

"That's something I would definitely remember. And hate," Leon said. He was all worked up and that didn't make him look any better when he compared himself to Ken.

"Ken and I haven't so much as cuddled in years. He's..."

Leon didn't let him continue. "I'm not worried about Ken's cuddling abilities."

"What are you worried about?" Phillip asked like it wasn't obvious.

"I know Ken has to be better in the sack than I am." Leon looked down. Everyone was better in the sack than he was.

"No one is better than you. I'm sorry. I should have made sure you knew Ken was my ex, but I didn't think it was a big deal," Phillip said sounding so very reasonable and infuriating.

"Not a big deal? Am I going to be no big deal one day?" The thought of it made Leon feel sick, but that could be his future.

"No. It won't be an issue because you'll never be my ex," Phillip said in a deadly serious voice.

Leon was speechless for a while. Did he hear that right? The word "never" echoed in his head. Finally he croaked out, "Never? That's..." He sort of felt out of breath all of a sudden. "You just said a whole bunch there, you know."

"I know. And I meant it," Phillip said, stepping up to Leon and placing his hands on his arms lightly. "I never want to be without you, and I'll do my best not to drive you away like I did the others."

"Don't compare me to those wimps," Leon said and locked his arms around Phillip's waist.

"There is no comparison. You're like no one else," Phillip said and kissed him gently on the mouth.

The sweet sensation made Leon's eyes fall closed. His whole body vibrated with bliss.

Leon smiled, savoring the kiss even when it was over. "Sorry I have kind of a steep learning curve. Having grown up without it, I guess I don't know what it feels like."

"What?"

"To have a rock solid person in your life," Leon said while looking into Phillip's gray eyes. "And since this is my first relationship, I never had to pretend not to be jealous before."

"I am ahead of you there. I've already pretended not to be jealous of your friend Pavel," Phillip admitted.

"Pavel?" Leon considered him for a minute. "He isn't bad, sort of a big, blond bear."

"I don't like the sound of that," Phillip growled. His jealous side wasn't at all a bad thing.

"Good. But I never plan to give you anything to worry about," Leon promised him.

Phillip echoed his promise. "Same here."

"We're saying a lot. You sure?" Leon asked.

Phillip showed no doubt. "Absolutely. You matter to me more than anyone in the world except..."

Leon interrupted him. "That itty bitty guy sneaking around over there," he said seeing Ant creeping in behind Phillip's back.

Since he had been caught, Ant rushed over into Phillip's arms. As Phillip picked him up, he giggled.

"You're so little, I hardly even saw you," Leon told him.

"You did saw me," Ant said. "And you telled on me."

"I guess I did. You're growing fast. Your Uncle Phillip must be feeding you good food."

"It's all those veggies," Phillip said, and Ant denied it with a vigorous shake of his curly head. "Now you better get ready. We're visiting Lilly and Bernie and having dinner at Ivy Gate."

Once Ant went to goof off or whatever kids did when they were told to get ready, Leon looked at Phillip. "I would expect you to start correcting his grammar at some point."

"I do it in my head, but I don't have the heart to do it out loud," Phillip said.

"You're such a softie." Leon kissed him. "I better go," he said and Phillip came to walk him to the door

"I meant to tell you how impressed I was with your poker skills. When it comes to competition, Ken has a take no prisoners attitude, but you beat him so easily," Phillip told Leon at the door.

"You could say it's in my blood. I told you about my dad gambling. He taught me a few things." Leon remembered his nimble fingers, the sleights-of-hand that were actually cheating.

"You're always playing cards with Ant, but I never made the connection.

Maybe because you always let him win," Phillip said.

"I like to see the boy happy. He has enough time to learn how to be a gracious loser," Leon said.

"Who's the softie now?" Phillip teased him and gave him a lingering, deep goodbye kiss.

As he was about to step into the hall, Leon stopped. Phillip shouldn't have kissed him like that. He turned back and asked him, "How do you feel about dropping Ant off with Lilly and Bernie? Is that allowed over there?"

"I've seen parents drop off their kids for a visit, so I'm sure it is. What do you have in mind?"

"Alone time," Leon said simply. He didn't want to say more about what he had planned. He did come up with where they might go. "I remember seeing a nice hotel on the way. Faberview, right?"

Phillip didn't say anything.

As he stared at his unreadable expression, Leon's heart started to sink. "You better say something," he warned Phillip.

"I'll call ahead to make sure we can get a room," Phillip said in a raspy voice.

Leon breathed a sigh of relief. "If that idea falls through, I'm willing to do it in the back seat," he said as Phillip got out his phone.

"You mean next to Ant's car seat? No thank you," Phillip said.

At Ivy Gate, Lilly was happy to get Ant all to herself, and Bernie was even happier to tease Phillip and Leon about what they were going to be getting up to.

"Don't do anything I wouldn't do," she called out after them as they left.

Lilly had different advice. "Don't do anything she would do either."

Faberview Inn didn't have the vibe that said let's sneak off for some sex. It was cozy and more expensive than Leon realized. Phillip handed over his credit card and wouldn't let Leon talk him out of paying.

They were taken up to their room, and went there hand in hand. The spacious room was full of rustic charm but with all the modern amenities. They walked on thick-planked wood floors to take in the view.

Two small windows overlooked the treetops in the courtyard below and beyond that showed them the curves of the hills in the distance. A wall of rough, white stones surrounded an arched fireplace. The bed was big and covered in white linen.

Once Leon was left alone with Phillip, the room became only a hazy backdrop. Phillip was all Leon could see. He was all the light and air in that room. When he turned to lock his eyes on Leon's, everything stopped.

Leon opened his mouth to speak, but too soon Phillip's mouth was on his. His kiss was like lightning and he was tearing at Leon's clothes. The strength of Phillip's body, his deep kiss, and his erection rubbing against him made

Leon frantic with need.

In seconds they were pulling each other to the floor. Getting in each other's way, they were trying to rip one another's clothes off and kiss and grope all at the same time. Frenzied, they wrestled for control, for a handhold, for something unattainable until Phillip held Leon off and just breathed for a minute. He got up and helped Leon up off the floor.

Now that their tussle was over, Phillip seemed more like himself. He looked kind of embarrassed and apologized. Leon grinned at him.

"I like your wild side," Leon told him, his voice husky with the passion that Phillip had unleashed in him so suddenly.

"First I want to tell you I love you," Phillip said breathlessly.

"Phillip," Leon said, stunned. This was too unreal.

Phillip took his hands in his own. "I want you to know how I feel. I don't want history repeating itself. I can't lose you."

"You won't. Just hold on tight and then history will stay history," Leon said, his voice thick, his vision swimming. He felt like he was lost in a dream.

"When I think of you, it's like my heart just stops, everything stops. I just want to wrap myself in you." Phillip drew him close and held him tight.

"That's how I feel. I love you. I want you. Please fuck me."

Chapter 37

For a breathless eternity Phillip only stared. Leon's whole body was a string pulled too tight, vibrating, ready to snap. His heart, his cock, every part of him was aching for Phillip.

The lightest touch of Phillip's hand sent currents of pleasure coursing through him, seeking his dick. What would it be like to have someone like that inside him? And how the hell was he going to make sure he didn't screw it up? Whatever it took, Leon wasn't going to let his fucked up past overshadow how good Phillip made him feel.

Leon was determined, but Phillip hadn't said anything yet. Then his answer came in the form of a deep kiss and a tight embrace. Phillip's hold on him was crushing, the kiss insanely passionate. In response to it, every part of Leon screamed yes.

As Phillip ran his hands down his back and lightly cupped his ass, Leon grunted and pressed himself into him. Feeling his hard cock against his own made his fear rise. Leon held his breath through the grip of fear, but the terror didn't last. It was quickly smothered by desire and the knowledge that this wasn't just any cock, this was Phillip, the man he wanted, the first one he truly wanted to give himself to.

"Don't worry. I won't make any sudden moves," Phillip said. He must have caught that flash of fear.

"I can't promise the same thing," Leon told him. For once, he didn't want to run from a man who intended to fuck him. He was impatient to finally have Phillip, to prove himself to him and to show him all the love that was trapped inside him until now.

They undressed each other, Leon more roughly and eagerly. He wanted all of Phillip on display. When he had Phillip stripped and his stuffy clothes were strewn all around, he just stopped and stared. But he couldn't let his eyes roam that beautifully sculpted body without his hands joining in.

As Leon groped him, Phillip maneuvered him to the bed. The heat of Phillip's smooth skin burned his naked body. Firm muscles played under his hands. Phillip pushed him down, spread his legs apart and climbed on the bed too. For a moment they merely locked eyes and breathed hard as Phillip kneeled between his thighs.

Slowly Phillip leaned down and started licking a path up his thigh and around his cock. He was very deliberately pushing Leon toward the edge. Leon panted, anticipating the moment Phillip's mouth would slide over his cock.

When it happened, it was better, hotter, and more dizzying than he expected. The swirling of his tongue was a whirlpool of pleasure. Phillip's mouth was pure magic. Pure bliss. The attention he gave his cock was loving but firm, just enough to prime him for what was coming.

Once he had Leon moaning and begging, Phillip stopped, leaving him

unsatisfied. Leon groaned and cursed until Phillip kissed him into silence. Uncapping the lube Leon had brought, he started fingering him. Opening him up wasn't easy at first as Leon's body fought the intrusion. But Phillip never stopped kissing him, and Leon could feel his body surrendering to him.

The sensation of Phillip's fingers inside him was driving him out of his mind and close to coming. But damn him, Phillip knew just when to stop. He had Leon squirming, dying for more and he pulled his fingers out of Leon's lubed hole.

While Leon glared at him, Phillip lay on his back next to him and kissed him.

"Get on top," Phillip ordered him.

Leon straddled him and felt his legs shake. His eyes traced a path from Phillip's hard cock over his perfect torso to his mouth. He rested his hands on Phillip's powerful chest and kissed him. Without breaking their kiss, Phillip rolled on a condom and slicked it with lube. Leon wanted to do that for him next time, but first he had to deal with what was happening right now.

Knowing that at least one of them was ready, Leon got into position. Phillip rubbed his ass then moved one hand to his hip. By lightly stroking his cock, Phillip encouraged him to get on with it.

Leon lowered himself slowly and felt the head of Phillip's cock. As he pushed down to take it in, his mind sort of went blank for a second.

Then he heard Phillip talking to him. "Slow and easy." His voice was low and growly but somehow comforting and definitely encouraging.

Leon let his body drop an inch lower then another. Phillip's cock was thick and rock hard inside him. Phillip's hands rubbed his thighs as he breathlessly moaned Leon's name.

Leon couldn't believe it. He was really doing this and the ecstatic look on Phillip's face told him just how good it felt. He pushed down further.

Gasping from the effort but euphoric from just having Phillip inside him, he got impatient. He lowered himself too fast. That's when the incredible feeling of fullness mixed with pain.

Phillip moaned and then warned him not to go so fast. He placed his hands on Leon's hips to make sure of it. Leon only heard him distantly through a haze of pleasure and pain – a weird sensation he had never experienced before.

He didn't know how something could be painful but still good. It was amazing to have Phillip inside him, and that was all that mattered, what he wanted more than anything.

The need for Phillip drove him on. No matter how much it hurt, he had the crazy urge to slam down and take him in all the way. He wasn't that stupid plus Phillip's restraining hands on his hips wouldn't let him. He watched Leon with a warning look in his eyes.

"No sudden moves?" Leon asked, his voice coming out husky and breathless.

"I'm not going anywhere so don't rush," Phillip told him.

Resting his weight on his arms, Leon leaned down for a kiss. The pain was pulsing, but it was OK. It served to remind him that this was real and not a dream. Then the stab of pain was just a memory and all there was, all that existed was Phillip under him and his cock moving inside him.

Slowly, moaning uncontrollably the whole time, Leon pushed all the way down. Exulting in the feeling of having Phillip all the way inside him, Leon rocked against him. The motion sent pulses of pleasure through both of them.

After that, nothing could have stopped him from riding Phillip's cock. He was impaled on pure pleasure over and over. He felt beads of sweat running down his spine and he still wasn't riding him in earnest.

Under him Phillip's body was rising like a wave, more powerful than anything he had ever experienced, but he wanted to experience more. Making a unilateral decision, Leon pulled off and rolled them over on the big bed so that Phillip was on top of him.

"Warn a guy," Phillip told him.

"Not enough breath for that," Leon gasped.

Phillip used the opportunity Leon gave him to add some lube.

"Hurry up," Leon gasped and gripped the sheets in his fists as Phillip fingered him.

Phillip pushed his knees up and got his legs out of the way. Folded up, Leon felt a tremor of deep need shake his whole body. But when Phillip's stiff cock pressed against his ass, he gasped. It was different, more frightening, now that Phillip was in control.

Phillip didn't move. He stayed still with his eyes locked on Leon's, his chest heaving. Then Phillip said his name and kissed him.

Leon could feel the weight of Phillip's body pressing him into the mattress as he returned the kiss. With that, Leon accepted this man's power over him. He was the one, the only one who could have him, take him, and give him the fucking he was dying for.

Seeing that he was ready, Phillip pressed his knees into his chest harder and pushed in with a grunt. The unyielding pressure drove Phillip's cock deeper and deeper inside him. Sparks were going off in Leon's head and a deep moan tore out of him.

He didn't know how it would feel, but he didn't expect it would feel like Phillip was sinking into his soul. A jolt of searing pleasure went up his spine then burst through his whole body. It obliterated everything except Phillip, the man inside him.

The blazing heat of Phillip's body branded him. The hardness of his cock so deep inside, all the way, drove him wild. Then Phillip started pumping, and Leon turned into an animal. Leon's sanity was dissolving with each bone shaking impact of Phillip's body. He groped Phillip like he wasn't human, too rough, carried away by what this man was doing to him. Slick skin, tight

muscles, he felt so good under Leon's punishing hands.

He gripped Phillip's muscular ass and thrust up for more, joining with him, crashing their bodies together. Sweat drenched, their bodies slammed together in a crazy, desperate dance. There was more heat and passion between them than either one of them could handle for long.

Phillip kissed him, mixing ecstasy and tenderness until Leon had gone clear out of his mind. Pleasure surged inside him. Spurts of come shot out high and proud as his hips bucked wildly, his body out of control. Phillip had to hold him still so he could ride him to his own climax. When it came, Leon felt its force shake his whole body.

Spent and panting, Leon opened his arms to him. Phillip's hard muscles relaxed and he fell into his embrace. Leon held him tight and laughed. He was so happy. Phillip was like a dream.

"Are you feeling what I'm feeling?" Leon whispered, speaking right in Phillip's ear.

"What are you feeling?" Phillip asked. His voice was gravelly as his lips grazed Leon's throat.

Leon summed up what he felt in one word, "Amazing."

"Then yes," Philip said. His lips made their way over Leon's jaw to his mouth. The kiss he gave him felt like Phillip was drinking from his soul.

Chapter 38

Knowing it must be getting late, Phillip somehow found the strength to let go of Leon's sleeping form. Carefully freeing himself from him, Phillip got out of bed. It was as if he was waking up from a dream, but he hadn't even closed his eyes.

Picking up the clothes Leon had thrown all over the floor, Phillip frowned at their wrinkled state. He needed to put himself back together, but he felt pretty much the way his clothes looked – tangled and turned inside out. Still, he had to try and make himself presentable. After a quick shower, he dressed and went back to sit on the bed.

Leon stirred and rose toward him. Eyes still closed, he gave Phillip a sleepy kiss. "You're minty," he mumbled.

Phillip kissed him harder and got him to open his eyes. "Are you going to need a day off tomorrow?" he asked Leon.

Leon laughed and swung his legs off the bed. Then he sat up with a groan. "Maybe I will." He frowned at Phillip, but mainly he just looked so happy that Phillip couldn't help staring at him.

"What are you looking at?" Leon asked him. Then he answered his own question. "You're looking at a man in love."

Once Leon was ready, they left the inn and went to pick up Ant. Even while they loaded Ant in the car, Phillip didn't want to let Leon go. He couldn't bear the thought of it. He could hardly bear not touching him, not smothering him with kisses.

As he drove toward home, Phillip's eyes strayed to Leon. Leon's knees looked so inviting. He wanted to rest his hand on one of them then move up over his thigh, the muscle hard when he squeezed it.

None of that was happening with Ant in the back seat, chattering about his adventures at the nursing home. If Phillip wanted to get his hands on Leon again, he had to act fast.

"Come home with us," Phillip begged him.

Ant added his enthusiastic agreement.

"Haven't you had enough of me?" Leon asked.

Phillip and Ant were in agreement again and said no. They all went home together as night fell around them and street lights came on. In the company of the two people he loved the most, Phillip was indescribably happy.

That night, for the first time Leon was sleeping in Phillip's bed. He was sprawled over him, his head on Phillip's shoulder. Feeling his heartbeat and the rise and fall of his chest as he breathed, Phillip lay awake, reliving their lovemaking.

Hazy moonlight came in through the window. The night sounds of the city were only a faraway hum. In that stillness, Phillip's whole world was

spinning. Leon's voice was in his head, calling his name, telling him to fuck him.

Even more than his words, the sound of his voice had resounded inside him and obliterated every rational objection. Phillip said yes with a passionate kiss that promised that he would make him sweat then lap up every drop. But he would be gentle too, listen to every breath, every whisper, and every unsaid word telling him to go fast or slow, take it easy or go to it hard.

Phillip was drunk on him, his scent, the feel of his body. His lips formed words of love against Leon's skin. This was the only skin his lips should ever touch, and this mouth was the only one he wanted to kiss.

Leon shifted next to him and curled himself around a pillow. His t-shirt had ridden up, exposing his slim torso above the waistband of Phillip's pajama bottoms he had borrowed. Phillip turned on his side and gazed at him. A trim body and a beautiful heart – what more could a man want. But Leon was so much more.

Phillip looked at him and he was amazed. Only twenty and having gone through so much, and he was the one Phillip leaned on the most, the one he loved. Whenever he was with Leon, he wanted to make time stop. He wanted forever with him.

Right now he just wanted to hold Leon as he slept, but he was afraid to wake him. Very gently, he reached out his hand and touched Leon's messy curls. With his eyes starting to close, Phillip thought he might finally be able to sleep.

A guttural cry from Leon shocked him awake. He reached for him, but Leon jumped away from him and scrambled off the bed. Phillip called to him, but he only backed away further. Leon didn't seem to recognize him even when he turned on the light.

Crouching in a corner, he was wild-eyed, deaf to everything Phillip said to reassure and calm him. Leon's mouth worked, but no sound came out. His hands clutched at nothing, desperate for something to grab and hold onto.

Inching closer, Phillip gave him his hand and didn't let Leon shake him off. He kept saying his name and telling him, "You're OK. Everything is all right now. You're safe with me. No one is going to hurt you."

Leon blinked at him then whispered his name. He just breathed for a while then gasped, "Phillip, I'm sorry."

"Don't worry," Phillip told him, then he looked toward the closed bedroom door.

It was too much to hope for that the noise hadn't woken Ant. He was just down the hall. As expected, in the next minute, he heard Ant calling, "Uncle Phillip" in a frightened little voice. Phillip squeezed Leon's hand and went out to see to Ant.

There he was peering down the hallway, his eyes wide. He was relieved to see Phillip in the doorway of his bedroom.

"It's OK. Everyone is awake," Phillip said as Ant ran over to him and took his hand.

"What's wrong with Leon?" Ant asked seeing Leon sitting on the floor of the bedroom.

"He had a bad dream."

Letting go of Phillip's hand, Ant ran right up to Leon. He threw his arms around Leon's neck and gave him a hug.

"Don't be scared, Leon. Uncle Phillip is here," Ant told him.

"Yes, he is and so are you. Don't worry. I'm OK," Leon assured him.

Ant peered at him intently. "You're not scared any more?"

"Not even a little bit. You're here and you're a superhero, right? You're Ant-man," Leon said and Ant jumped up.

"Ant-man!" Ant repeated and raised his little fists in the air.

"Well, Ant-man should go back to bed now. He has school in the morning," Phillip told him.

"Ant-man!" he yelled one more time as he ran back to his bedroom ahead of Phillip.

Phillip put Ant back to bed, the whole time hiding how concerned he was about Leon. When he got back to his bedroom, he found Leon in the bathroom. He was at the sink, splashing water on his face. Phillip handed him a towel. Putting his arm around his shoulders, Phillip felt him shake a little.

Leon didn't pull away though. He leaned into his embrace instead. "Just an aftershock. I'm OK. I'm sorry. I shouldn't bring this into your space and especially Ant's."

"Don't worry about that. Ant is fine." He led Leon to the bed so they could sit down. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Sitting at the foot of the bed with Phillip holding his hand, Leon frowned deeply. "I just couldn't get free. Like something from my childhood caught up to me and wouldn't let me go. I remember being helpless, being pinned down and not being able to move. I had that feeling even after I woke up, and I have no idea where it came from. I was so happy." Leon looked bewildered.

"Did I rush you?" Phillip wondered. "I'm sorry. If I had known..."

Leon cut him off. "No, you didn't, but maybe I rushed myself. I just wanted to be with you so badly, and it was wonderful. I'm just sorry I scared Ant. Maybe I shouldn't sleep over."

Phillip rejected that idea immediately. "No. I don't want you to be alone with your nightmares."

Leon turned to him with a grim look. "You want me bringing them here, waking up Ant and scaring him? I never meant to be a complication in your life."

"You're not a complication. And this is exactly where you should be. We love you and you're safe here," Phillip said and gripped both of Leon's hands in his.

He wanted to make him forget every bit of pain he ever felt. For now he just held him as they lay in bed.

Chapter 39

Leon left early that morning, refusing breakfast. He acted cheerful for Ant's sake, but Phillip could tell that he was still suffering the effects of his nightmare. He wished Leon had taken a day off, but he wouldn't hear of it. As he left, he gave Phillip a reassuring smile that had just a hint of sadness.

All morning Phillip dwelled on what he had witnessed last night. Seeing Leon transformed in front of his eyes, a frightened child again and not the man he knew, Phillip wanted to bludgeon every single person who had ever hurt him.

For the first time, Phillip saw inside his pain. It was in his eyes – blind and terrified. It was in the way his body shook and felt cold under his hand. At that moment, Leon's buried pain had been real enough to touch. Once again, he was a little boy with no one to protect him. Phillip wanted to reach out to him, past and present and bring him out of that darkness.

Worrying about Leon made him consider what might have happened to Ant. With his mother gone, Lilly had been his only safety net before Phillip came along. That prompted him to ask Ant what he remembered about his mother.

They were sitting at the counter in the kitchen, Ant with an almost empty bowl of cereal in front of him, Phillip with a full cup of coffee that had gone cold.

"She had lots of jobs and they were far, far away so she couldn't stay with me," Ant said like he was repeating someone else's words.

That must have been the explanation Lilly had given him for why Joan wasn't around. Ant seemed to accept it for now, but as he grew up, that explanation would start to sound hollow. As he got older, Ant might see things differently and feel hurt by her abandonments.

"What else do you remember about her?"

"Mom was funny and she liked to play with me. But sometimes she was sick and she couldn't play. Then she got really, really sick and she died." Ant's face crumpled and Phillip took him in his arms and held him for a long time.

At the office, they were swamped with work, but nothing could keep Phillip from worrying about Leon. Outwardly he seemed OK. Leon was juggling ten things at once and showing no sign of the rough night he had. Phillip kept a close eye on him. Of course Leon noticed and warned him about it.

"You don't need to babysit my inner demons. They're all grown up," Leon told him.

"Sorry. I'll be more discreet," Phillip told him.

"I was telling you to cut it out, not be stealthy," Leon grumbled.

"It's the best I can offer," Phillip told him apologetically.

Having seen how Leon still suffered, Phillip was more amazed than ever by his strength. How could he be so wonderful? He should be raging at the

world, not smiling at Phillip like an angel.

A little later Ken strolled into the office. He had texted demanding to be taken to lunch. He had even given Phillip permission to bring Leon. Phillip already told Ken he was too busy. Now here he was.

Needless to say, Leon wasn't pleased to see him. Watching Ken walk past his desk and into the inner office, Leon shot him a look that was pure, cold-blooded murder.

"I'll just close this door," Ken said to taunt Leon.

"Don't you dare," Phillip warned him.

"I guess I can leave it open since I'm here to kidnap you," Ken said.

"I told you I didn't have time for lunch," Phillip reminded him. "That means I don't have time for kidnapping either."

"Jerk," Ken said then he lingered and poked around his office. "So what's with the gloom and doom?" He finally asked turning to Phillip. He had a look on his face that challenged Phillip to just try and bullshit him.

There was no way in hell Phillip could tell him what was on his mind, but he had to give him something. Instead of mentioning Leon, he told him the other issue that was weighing on him. "I was talking to Ant about his mother." Phillip opened a desk drawer and pulled out a copy of a photo that Lilly had given him for Ant. It was Ant with his mother, both of them smiling.

Ken looked at the picture critically then delivered his verdict. "At least she was pretty."

Phillip nodded. "Ant was telling me about her. I don't think he remembers his mother very clearly. I already knew that she came and went, stayed only for a few days. Thank God Lilly was willing to raise Ant."

"That kid had no luck until you came along," Ken said and dropped into a chair on the other side of Phillip's desk.

"It could have been worse." Phillip was thinking of Leon's unhappy childhood, but Ken didn't know anything about that.

"Really? His mother abandoned the kid. He lived with an old, sick woman who could hardly take care of herself."

Phillip interrupted him to give Lilly the credit she deserved. "And who loved him and took the best care of him that she could."

Ken shrugged. "OK, but what about Ant's wayward mother. You don't resent her? I mean, she has this picture perfect kid and she ditches him every chance she gets." Ken then listed her crimes. "She kept Tony from his kid, she was an addict, she left Ant all the time. She died on him."

Phillip thought about that last crime. Tony was guilty of that too. "She was who she was," Phillip said, but he was still thinking about Tony and trying not to be angry at him for throwing his life away when he knew Ant was out there waiting for him, needing him.

"So it doesn't bother you that she was such a terrible mother to Ant?" Ken said still pushing Phillip to condemn her.

"It does. But Ant loved her and he means everything to me." Phillip just couldn't hate the woman who brought Ant into this world. Besides, she reminded him of Tony.

Ken then moved on to another topic. "Speaking of parents or whoever, something you need to keep in mind. Legally, you're on shaky ground when it comes to that kid. I'm no lawyer, but you've dated plenty of them so you should know better."

Phillip couldn't really argue with him. He just loved Ant so much, it was hard for him to think of him in terms of any legal issues. That didn't mean he could ignore a potential problem.

"You're right," he said to Ken, but he still continued to scold him.

"It's not like you not to cover all the bases. And you just said I was right. What's wrong with you? You have a fever?" Ken said and reached over his desk to feel his forehead.

Phillip dodged him and then kicked him out of his office.

Great, now Phillip had one more thing on his mind – adopting Ant. It was the best way to give him security. Phillip just couldn't wrap his head around the idea. He tried to tell himself it was the best thing he could do for Ant, but it felt like a betrayal of Tony. He was Ant's father. Taking his place just felt wrong.

As he wrestled with his irrational objection, he saw Leon come into his office and come around his desk. Phillip turned his chair to face him, but Leon pushed his chair back the other way again.

"As you were," he said.

Phillip felt Leon loosen his tie and his collar. Then his hands were on his shoulders, and Phillip shuddered at the contact. He grunted, feeling Leon's grip go all through him. First Phillip leaned forward, nearly in ecstasy, then he leaned back. He opened his eyes and looked up at Leon.

"That feels too good for the workplace."

"I didn't hear word one about stopping," Leon said archly.

"No, you didn't," Phillip said and it came out as a sigh. "I love your hands."

While Leon rubbed his shoulders, Phillip told him what was on his mind. "I know I have to take some legal steps, The obvious solution is for me to adopt Ant."

"I think Ant would love that," Leon said.

"I just don't want to rush in to take the place of the parents he lost," Phillip explained.

"I get it," Leon said. "But someone has to take their place. You shouldn't hesitate to do whatever it takes to give Ant the kind of home he deserves." Leon had to be thinking of the insecurities in his own childhood. His hands on Phillip's shoulders stilled then he asked. "When you were looking for Ant's

mother, what did you find out about her, what was she like?"

"I think she was a lot like Tony. She couldn't stay in one place, always on the move, looking for thrills. He was into cars. She was into drugs. Just another kind of vehicle, you could say. Their addictions killed them. The main thing is that she was Ant's mother."

"Don't worry. I'm not going to say anything against her. She gave you Ant. That's what matters," Leon said with understanding. He knew exactly how precious Ant was to Phillip.

Phillip took hold of his hands and kissed them. He was so lucky to have someone so wonderful in his life.

Chapter 40

After last night, Leon wasn't expecting to feel like himself any time soon. Coming into work that morning, he was ready to fake it if he had to. It wasn't too bad though. Being so busy helped, and being around Phillip could cure anything.

Later on in the day, Leon could swear that Phillip was up to something. It was almost time for him to go to pick up Ant when Phillip surprised Leon by coming up behind him. Before he could turn around, Phillip's hands were on his shoulders and he was giving him a massage.

"Returning the favor?" Leon asked with a sigh.

"Something like that," Phillip said. Then after he had Leon melting under the firm pressure of his hands, he revealed what he was really up to. "Please come home with us after work and stay the night."

"You were buttering me up," Leon accused him.

"Yes, I was. So will you? Please." Phillip leaned down to kiss his temple.

Leon furrowed his brow then slumped back in his chair in resignation. He couldn't say no to Phillip. "Let's give it another shot," he said and Phillip looked elated. It didn't seem like a good idea, but he would do anything to make Phillip happy. Now Leon just had to make sure not to ruin their time together.

It all went fine until it was time to go to sleep and Leon found himself back in Phillip's bed. The room was lit by moonlight. Phillip was next to him with Leon's arm draped over his chest. Everything seemed so right, perfect even.

Still, Leon couldn't help but remember what happened the last time he slept in this bed. Everything seemed perfect then too until he had opened his eyes to darkness and screams. And even after Phillip turned on the light, the darkness was still on top of him, inside him, choking him. Phillip called his name and reached out for him cautiously, but Leon flinched away from his touch. Every touch was bad. It was going to hurt.

The sane part of him had tried to remind him that this was Phillip. He was good. He was safe. But that fact filtered in very slowly and only crystallized when Phillip took his hand and didn't let go even as Leon tried to pull away. That firm but gentle grip was so familiar, every cell in his body knew it.

"Phillip." He whispered his name like it was magic.

Seeing the concern and pain on his face brought Leon back to himself. For Phillip he could get himself under control. Leon hated that he had to see him like that, and there was Ant to think of.

Thank God he had calmed down a little by the time Ant came over to see what all the noise was about. That sweet little guy, he really was amazing, definitely just like his uncle. His first instinct was to reach out and make everything better.

For his sake, tonight Leon wanted to make sure he didn't have another

nightmare. That's why he was afraid to go to sleep.

Phillip called him on it. "You're making sure you don't have another nightmare by staying awake."

"You aren't asleep either. I'm just keeping you company," Leon said and snuggled closer to him. "I'm sorry. I know I don't make it easy on you."

Phillip wrapped him in his arms and kissed his hair. "Loving you is easy. It's only hard because I can't erase your pain."

"You have pain of your own. My pain is nothing new," Leon said.

"It's not gone either."

"No. It's become a part of me, I guess. I'm used to it." Years ago Leon left Danning, ran really. But everything that happened there followed him. Every time he went to sleep, he knew this might be another night when he woke up screaming. Then dreams of Phillip took the place of his nightmares. Leon looked at him and saw his concerned expression. "Don't you take on my pain as well as your own," he warned Phillip.

"I can't help it."

"You better," Leon told him sternly. "Keep your eye on the big prize. You might be adopting Ant any day now."

Phillip smiled. "With a little nudge from Ken. That's how all this got started."

"You mean he took a break from badmouthing me and pushed you to go for adoption?" Leon said.

"He didn't mention adoption. Ken isn't very trusting. He wanted me to have something legal and binding so I wouldn't lose Ant. He doesn't believe in taking risks. And until Ant came along, we were on the same page. Now my eyes are open to all sorts of possibilities," he looked at Leon meaningfully.

"Ant is a matchmaking prodigy and he doesn't even know it." Leon smiled then he thought about it. "No wonder Ken doesn't like me. I am kind of a big risk." Leon knew he wasn't exactly a prize with his past and his nightmares.

"I'm the one who can't hold onto a man."

Leon found that unbelievable. "I can't imagine that."

"When I was with Ken, I was miles away, obsessed with finding Tony. I drove him crazy. I'm lucky he's still willing to be my friend."

"Did Ken expect you to give up on your brother?"

"Not exactly, but it was a bad time. I lost track of Tony completely right then. Not hearing from Tony, not knowing where he was, I feared the worst. I wasn't fit to be in a relationship. Eventually Tony turned up in Arizona. He had taken a little trip south of the border." Phillip looked relieved for a second then his expression darkened. His brother was OK then, but it was only a reprieve.

Leon squeezed him tighter. "He kept you on your toes, huh?" he said to pull Phillip away from bad memories.

"He did. I'm surprised Ant isn't more like him," Phillip said. Thoughts of Ant cheered him up right away even if a deep well of sadness remained under

his faint smile.

"Give the kid a few years," Leon said as he pictured Ant growing up.

"I don't know. Even at three, Tony was the craziest kid. Always screaming, jumping, breaking something. He was a nonstop headache to our parents."

"Maybe Ant is like you even if you don't have that curly head of hair," Leon suggested as he reached up to muss his hair.

"Me? I don't think so."

"Do you remember yourself at three? Ant might look like your brother, but on the inside he's just like his uncle. He's gentle and good. And kind of lovable," Leon added and gave Phillip a quick kiss.

Phillip denied it shyly. "Doesn't sound like me. Maybe there could only be one Tony, and Ant is simply his own little person. I'm glad about that even if the bad kid is always the most loved," Phillip said. Seeing the odd look Leon gave him, he elaborated, "Franny told me that. 'The good kid is overlooked while the bad kid is the most loved.'"

Leon was skeptical of that, but how would he know. "I was afraid to be bad when I was a kid." Half the time Leon felt like he had to hold his breath so no one would notice that he was alive and punish him for it.

Phillip ran his fingers through Leon's hair. "It was different for us. Tony knew that he could be as bad as he wanted to be, and we would still love him. At least he did when he was a kid. I'm not so sure if he knew it later."

"Of course he did. You never stopped looking for him. You played hide and seek with your brother right up to the end," Leon told him.

"Is that what we were doing?" Phillip asked.

"He knew you were looking for him, didn't he?"

"He did, but he still kept moving, always just out of reach. Once, when we were fighting, Ken pointed out to me, 'Maybe if you stopped chasing him, he would have come back by now. He isn't here because he knows you just want to control him.'"

"Why are you quoting him? You know I think Ken is full of crap," Leon said harshly.

"You're wonderful," Phillip said with a chuckle.

"I don't know. Mostly I'm scared out of my mind," Leon admitted.

"What scares you?"

"Not the stuff that happened in the past. That's over. I'm afraid I'll screw up what I have now." Leon tried to explain. "I never wanted anything as much as I want to be with you. I never want to let you go. But it's like wanting to own a private jet – how can that ever happen?"

"I'm not a private jet. I'm a guy holding you, a guy who loves you," Phillip said and squeezed him harder to let him know this was real.

Leon felt it. He felt every inch of him, and his desire surged in response. He shifted over so he was lying on top of Phillip. "And I'm a guy that's about to kiss you senseless," Leon said as he looked into his eyes. Then he delivered on that promise and he kissed Phillip hard enough to bruise him.

Chapter 41

Once he made his decision, Phillip became preoccupied with what he needed to do about Ant. He had already put in a call to his lawyer and another one who specialized in adoptions. From what they said, the process wouldn't be quick or easy. Before he could do anything else, Phillip had to find out how Lilly felt about it. Without her blessing, he couldn't even think of going forward.

On their next visit to Ivy Gate, Leon and Ant came armed with Lilly's favorite – oatmeal cookies. The scent of fresh baked cookies filled the whole car. Leon and Ant had made them together that morning and made a mess of Phillip's kitchen as well. Not wanting to horn in on their gift, Phillip brought pink and white peonies for Lilly and Bernie.

The day was sunny, and Lilly and Bernie had taken a table by a small clearing. Ant set down the box of cookies in front of them proudly. The cookies were a hit and earned Ant the title of little baker-man.

Since this wasn't just a social visit, Leon and Ant kept Bernie company, and Phillip walked to a shady spot to speak to Lilly. The sun still sneaked down through the branches, but it was much cooler there. Phillip told Lilly his concerns about his legal standing in Ant's life and that he had spoken to a lawyer. It turned out she had already been thinking about the same issues.

"I asked somebody about that sort of thing. Gil, who's a few doors down from us, used to be a lawyer. With me being in poor health so recently, he said I should sign something just in case. God knows what might happen and Ant will need looking after."

"Actually, I was thinking of going beyond that. I want to adopt Ant," Phillip told her.

She looked kind of uncertain about that. "You're his guardian angel," she said after a little while.

"I don't know about that, but I'm happy to do whatever I can for Ant and you, even if you're against me adopting him." Though he tried to prepare himself for disappointment if she said no, Phillip couldn't imagine wanting anything more than this.

"I have to admit I am scared of losing him, that he won't be my Ant any more," Lilly said.

"Of course he will. I would never want to keep you two apart," Phillip assured her.

"I can see the other side of it too. Just for my peace of mind, it would be a good thing to have everything sewn up. And Ant is happy with you. You take good care of him." Taking a deep breath, Lilly straightened, raised her chin and said, "Get your lawyer started on the paperwork. I've made up my mind. You can adopt Ant." Though she couldn't give Ant a home any more, she

could tell that he needed one. She was an amazing lady.

For a moment Phillip was overcome. Once he was able to speak, he told her a heartfelt "Thank you."

"I'm doing it for Ant. And I think Joan would be all right with it too. My poor Joan. I never imagined that such a wild girl could bring into this world a sweet and gentle child like Ant," Lilly said, her eyes misty with emotion. She reached under her glasses to wipe her eyes.

"Tony was wild too."

"And here is our Ant as sweet as can be. Children sure are a mystery."

Phillip looked over at the clearing where Leon and Ant played catch with a ball from Bernie's physical therapy. Bernie was cheered them on, but since it was Bernie, it was more like heckling.

"Look at him, so happy," Lilly said in wonder while Ant flailed trying to catch the ball. Most of the time he missed or fumbled but he kept laughing anyway. "You're good for him. I always had to worry about what would happen once I was gone. Knowing Ant has someone he can depend on puts my mind at ease more than I can say. And you're the right kind of role model for my little Ant. One day when he has kids of his own, he'll do right by them. I just know it," Lilly said as she watched Ant playing

"I'm sure he will," Phillip said though he couldn't think that far ahead. Ant was just too little. How could he ever possibly be a grown-up with children?

Lilly went to sit with Bernie and spoke with her for a while. After that, she recruited Ant and Leon to help her get some cold drinks for everybody. Phillip offered to go in her place, but she pointed him to Bernie still sitting at the table.

"Her majesty wants a word," Lilly told him. "And don't let her eat my oatmeal cookies while I'm gone."

Feeling a little dazed, Phillip went over to Bernie. The sunlight seemed extra bright as he watched Ant scamper off while holding Lilly and Leon's hands. Turning to Bernie, Phillip hadn't recovered enough to know what to say.

Bernie wasn't tongue-tied. "You shouldn't be standing there so dumb-struck," she told him. "Ant deserves the best of everything in the world, and now Lilly has a way to give it to him in one big, suit wrapped package. You, Phillip Morton, are the answer to everything Lilly ever wanted for that child but couldn't give him."

"I'm glad you approve," Phillip told her.

"I may not look like it, but I know what's what. You are solid through and through, like a father should be. You're mister responsible. That's what little Ant needs. And you have that friend too, tall and good-looking with those smiling eyes."

Phillip looked at her and wondered if this was going to turn into another uncomfortable discussion of his sex life.

"I got eyes," Bernie said. "And I'm glad you didn't end up with some stick in

the mud."

"Like me," Phillip guessed.

Bernie shrugged with her good shoulder. "You're all right, but two of you – I don't know."

"Thanks, Bernie," Phillip told her and he meant it. She was like family to Ant and Lilly, and she was becoming like family to him too.

That made him remember something. Hadn't Ken accused him of trying to reconstruct his lost family? Phillip didn't think he was doing that. It was pure luck that he found the people he cared about. At a time like this, he was so grateful to have them in his life, but he was also aware of what he lost.

He had spent years missing Tony even when he was alive. Then came that phone call he had been dreading for so long. It was like the news of Tony's death always existed out there, and it was only a matter of time before it reached him.

But that wasn't right. Tony was once a tiny devil full of life and mischief. He was a headstrong teenager. He was a thrill seeking young man. The one thing he didn't get to be was a real dad to Ant. Now Phillip would take his place.

Lilly, Leon and Ant came back loaded down with beverages. After everyone was together again, Phillip stood a little apart from the others. He was lost in thought when Leon came over and put a hand on his lower back.

"I heard you got good news. Why the solemn face?" Leon asked him.

"Just thinking about Tony," Phillip said. He and Leon strolled away from the others. The tree-lined path circled the clearing and they had it mostly to themselves. There they could talk more freely.

"Until Ant came along, I was afraid to even dream of having a family of my own. I just didn't think I was meant for that," Phillip said while Leon walked with an arm around his waist.

"You? You were born to be somebody's dad. That's why you're so caring and responsible," Leon told him.

"I'm just the uncle," Phillip said to remind both of them. "And I'm so lucky to have Ant. It seems greedy to want anything more than to know that he exists. When I first found out about him, I was so afraid it was all just a fairy tale some girl told Tony. And now, if everything goes right..." Phillip was too overcome to speak, and Leon put his other arm around his shoulders and kissed his cheek.

They stayed like that, embracing and looked over at where Bernie and Lilly were tossing the ball with Ant. That mostly involved Ant chasing after the ball when he failed to catch it.

"When I see him with Lilly and Bernie, I wish Franny and Moe were here to meet Ant in person." Phillip had introduced them to Ant on Skype, but that wasn't nearly as good as the real thing. "On my side of the family they are his only living grandparents, but we kind of drifted apart over the last few years.

Knowing it was my fault that Tony left, I couldn't face them for a long time. Then they left the country."

"Did they really blame you?" Leon asked as they continued strolling.

"No. They blamed themselves. But Tony was on the verge of running, and I was the one who gave him that final push. They moved to Italy a few years ago. That was always their dream. I think they would have done it sooner if it wasn't for me and Tony." Phillip smiled thinking of the red roofed house and the rocky garden Franny and Moe had in Italy. The image gave him all sorts of ideas. "I can't wait for us take Ant over there for a visit. Maybe on our honeymoon. They could babysit while we go off to explore the Amalfi Coast."

"What?" Leon asked, shocked.

"Nothing," Phillip said innocently. "Just thinking out loud."

Leon stopped and glared at him with those pretty eyes, his hair glowing in the sun. He looked like an angel from a Renaissance painting. One who happened to be ranting at him. "Who the hell are you? All reserved and cautious, Mr. 'let's take it slow' then jumping ahead to a honeymoon in Italy. Who bodysnatched my Phillip?" Leon asked and gave him a light punch on the arm.

"You did," Phillip told him and leaned in for a soft kiss.

"This isn't on me. This is Ant's doing. He has made a new man out of you."

"It's not just Ant. It's you as well. I feel like my true life has arrived, like I have arrived," Phillip said.

Leon didn't say anything. He just smiled, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

Phillip needed to be in his arms right now. He was weightless and almost dizzy with happiness. It was all too much for him. With Ant and Leon, he had a life overflowing with joy even as sadness stayed underneath, attached to every precious memory of Tony and his parents.

Chapter 42

It was just a sunny Saturday at a nursing home, and Leon felt like a thousand things had happened to him and around him. All by itself, Phillip's talk of a honeymoon was enough to have his head spinning. Then Phillip and Lilly sat down with Ant and told him about the adoption.

Phillip was choked up and close to tears. Lilly did most of the talking while Ant was cheerfully oblivious to how momentous this news was. Leon wanted to laugh. Bernie did laugh. To celebrate the big event, Leon promised Ant a big adoption day party. That news had him cheering.

This was another night Leon slept over at Phillip's. Unlike last time, Leon actually did sleep, not straight through the night though. Another nightmare invaded his unconscious mind, threatening to drown him in fear and pain. Before it got too bad, Phillip shook him awake. With his guardian angel holding him in his arms, Leon went right back to sleep.

He woke up happy, his body entwined with Phillip's. It could have been a perfect, lazy Sunday morning in bed. But with Ant out there roaming the apartment, Phillip had to leave the bed and go shower.

Leon rolled out of bed. In boxers and a t-shirt, his hair a mess, he looked around for his pants. With the requirements of decency satisfied, he left the bedroom and went in search of Ant.

The gentle burbling of the aquarium drew him to the living room. Ant wasn't there, so Leon stood there, enjoying the show. Soon he heard the sound of small feet on the wood floor. He looked over to see Ant, still in his pajamas, coming over to join him.

Just as Ant arrived, the fish decided to swim behind the curtain of seaweed and coral. Ant peered into the aquarium, searching for them.

"Where are the fish? Did they escape," Leon asked, keeping a straight face.

"Fishes," Ant gasped and stared into the water anxiously. He called Bee and Ruby as if he expected them to come running when they heard their names.

"Cats and fish never come when you call them. But don't worry, they're in there," Leon reassured him. "They're just hiding. Let's see if we can find them."

"Hide and seek!"

After the fish were found, Leon spotted some flashcards of the alphabet on the side table. He grabbed them and took them along as he and Ant went into the kitchen for some juice. Sitting at the kitchen counter, they used the flashcards as playing cards in a game they made up as they went along.

That's where Phillip found them. Seeing what they were up to, he was amused by the non-educational way they were using the flashcards.

"Just passing the time until breakfast," Leon said after they exchanged good mornings and a fairly chaste kiss.

"You won't have to wait long. I was just going to make some bacon and

eggs," he told them.

"I can help," Leon offered and started to get up.

'No, stay there. I want to pamper you," Phillip told him with a smile. "You go ahead and play with Ant."

"Yes, play with me," Ant said, agreeing with his uncle.

"How about if we both help?" Leon suggested. "We can't let your uncle do all the work."

They went over and Leon watched with distaste as Phillip pulled out the frying pan. The sight of it was already making him feel sick. "How about poached eggs instead and maybe we skip the bacon?"

"Poached?" Ant frowned.

"Poached means they'll be swimming around," Leon told him. He knew Ant would like the sound of that.

"Swimming like fishes. OK!"

Phillip went along with it, but he gave Leon an odd look.

After breakfast, they all cleared up the dishes. Hearing a burp from Ant, Leon congratulated him, "Good one."

"Don't do it on purpose," Phillip warned Ant, seeing that he was getting ready to do just that so he could get more of Leon's approval.

"And I was hoping we could have a burping contest," Leon said.

After Ant went to watch cartoons, Leon helped Phillip with the dishes.

"I think Ant still likes scrambled eggs better," Leon told him as he scraped half of his poached egg off the plate and into the garbage.

"It's good for him to try new things," Phillip said. "And you really do have a frying phobia." He must have noticed Leon's reaction when Phillip was about to start frying.

Leon took a deep breath then he told him about it. "I wouldn't call it a phobia, but I'd rather not have to look at a sizzling pan full of hot oil if I can help it. When I was a kid, Mom's boyfriend, Barry, held my hand over a frying pan and threatened to fry my fingers to a crisp. He thought I stole money out of his wallet. He wanted me to confess and give the money back, but I couldn't give him what I didn't have. Mom told him, 'Don't, Barry, that will leave a scar.' He decided a good old fashioned beating and kicking would teach me a lesson just as well." As Leon spoke, his voice sounded unnaturally flat and lifeless even to his own ears. "Afterward, while she was cleaning up my bloody face, my mom told me she was sorry. She said, 'Barry would have killed me for sure if he knew I took his money.'"

"Oh, my God," Phillip gasped. He looked horrified, but Leon just stared at him with a sad smile on his face.

"In the end, he didn't burn me," Leon said blandly. "But the smell of that oil heating up right under my hand, the sizzle of frying..."

"I'm sorry," Phillip said and pulled him into a hug.

To change the subject to something more cheerful, Leon told Phillip, "My birthday is coming up in two weeks. My mom and her hubby are throwing me a party."

"Your mother," Phillip said and his face became very grim. He probably couldn't understand why Leon hadn't turned his back on her.

"Yes. After everything she did and didn't do, I'm still stuck with her as my one and only mother. I don't even know why she and Gary are doing this. I try never to visit them. Gary can be kind of a jerk, but he's hardly the worst of them." Compared to his mother's bad choices before now, Gary was a prize catch. "He's decent enough to my mom so that's something. They planned the party without asking me. Now that I'm going to be old enough to drink, it's an excuse for everyone to get shit-faced. They are going to all this trouble and inviting all the people who don't like me so I can't miss it," Leon said, trying to explain as best he could.

"Aren't your friends going?" Phillip asked.

"No way. They wouldn't mix well with that crowd. It won't be any fun so you don't have to come. You, me and Ant..."

Phillip cut him off. "It's your birthday party. Of course we're coming."

Leon was grateful. "If you're sure. There will be some kids there for Ant to play with so it won't be a total loss."

"We'll make the best of it. Maybe we'll meet some interesting people," Phillip said with a straight face.

Leon didn't buy it. "Don't pretend that you're a mingler. You would just stand back, nurse a cheap beer, and wait for it to be over," he predicted. "But I want to do the real celebrating on Sunday with you and Ant. This friend of mine is crazy for fishing. I'm hijacking his boat. We can take it up the river. I bet Ant would love it."

"I'm sure he would. I don't suppose your friend has a life vest in Ant's size," Phillip said.

Leon only made a face.

"I'll get him one," Phillip said.

"So that's a yes." To celebrate, Leon kissed him. "This will be good, and Ant will not fall overboard. I promise. He needs more nature in his life anyway."

"We have the fish." Phillip pointed toward the living room.

"Which are trapped behind glass."

"I'll buy a cactus."

Leon laughed then he got thoughtful. "God, I hope that was a joke," he said. Phillip kept a straight face so he couldn't be sure.

"About Ant and fishing," Phillip started to say.

"Ant likes live fish and he likes fish sticks. He doesn't need to know what happens in-between. Is that what you were thinking?" Leon asked.

"Pretty much. And another thing, if Ant is going on a boat, I want to give him some swimming lessons before we go. Just in case. There is a pool

downstairs. We can..."

Leon had to interrupt him there. "Are you kidding me?"

"Which part?"

"About the pool downstairs," Leon said.

"It's not that big."

"Is it a pool?" Leon asked. Phillip gave up trying to downgrade the amenities of his apartment building, but Leon wasn't done with him. "I can't believe you have a pool in your building." Then he warned him, "Next time I come over, it won't be so easy to get rid of me."

"I was actually going to invite you over to help me teach Ant to swim."

"Didn't I just warn you?"

"I guess it didn't work," Phillip said with a smile.

"I need to check out this pool. I'm there." Then he started thinking of this as an opportunity. "We can have a little pool party. Can we invite a guest? I want Pavel to meet you. Meeting you by the pool would be even better."

"Sure. Invite him. I would like to meet him as well."

"Yes! You'll be down to your swim trunks. That's what I call the perfect opportunity to show you off properly."

Phillip didn't look thrilled but Leon was already off to find Ant and tell him the good news.

Chapter 43

Phillip was picking up Ant from daycare when he noticed that he looked somber. It turned out that he had some serious concerns about Leon's birthday. "I don't have a present for Leon and I don't have any money," Ant said and gave him a pitiful little pout.

"I have money," Phillip told him. "Do you know what you want to get him?"

Ant shook his head and looked distressed about it. It was clear how important Leon's birthday was to him.

Phillip thought about it for a second. "Leon likes things that are covered in chocolate," he reminded Ant. He figured Ant would be happier giving him something chocolate covered than any other kind of gift.

"He does! Pretzels and popcorn and potato chips," Ant listed.

"That's something you can get him. We'll go shopping now and hide the gift in the car," Phillip said since they were going out to dinner with Leon later.

On their shopping trip, they got a birthday card too. After coming home from dinner, Ant got to work on it. Leon was banned from the kitchen while the card sat open on the kitchen counter, and Ant sat down in front of it like it was homework.

"The card already has writing on it, so you don't have to worry. Look here, there's room for you to draw something." Phillip pointed out the blank space on the card.

Ant carefully chose an orange crayon and hunched over the open card. He only made one shy little line then he stopped.

"Go ahead. Don't worry. Whatever you draw, I promise Leon will like it," Phillip assured him. It was sweet how much he wanted to give Leon the perfect card.

Done with the drawing, which was both painstaking and incomprehensible, Ant ran to the living room to act sneaky around Leon. Leon played along, pretending to be both suspicious and clueless about what Ant might have been up to.

"It's amazing how good you are with him," Phillip said later, when he and Leon were getting ready for bed. Ant had been asleep for a while, but Phillip had just stepped on an action figure in his bare feet so he was reminded of what a handful he could be.

"Considering how I was raised?" Leon said to finish the thought. "It's not hard. I just remember how I was treated and do the opposite." Leon then grew serious. He was sitting on the edge of the bed and stopped in the middle of unbuttoning his shirt. "Do I seem whole to you?" he asked.

"Yes," Phillip said with no hesitation. "I'm the one who wouldn't be whole without you and Ant. To me, Ant is everything I lost, my whole family reborn in one little boy. I need him too much, but you give without asking anything

of him, with no expectations."

"You give me too much credit," Leon said. "The first time I ever felt right was just looking into your eyes after we kissed. I wasn't whole until then. I cut off a limb, left half of myself behind so I could keep going. But now I feel whole. You and Ant did that for me."

Phillip took him in his arms then finished unbuttoning his shirt for him. He wanted to worship every inch of him. He wanted to make him feel so good that pain wouldn't even be a memory. If he couldn't do that, then he wanted to just suck him off for hours and send him into the oblivion of sleep exhausted and satisfied.

Once he did just that, Phillip was sleepless and watchful. He couldn't take his eyes off Leon as he snored lightly. He was standing guard over him as if he could hold off nightmares with the force of his will and with his love for Leon. It was stupid, but he still did it. Phillip watched over him and fell in love with him more all the time.

On the day of their pool party and swimming lesson, Ant was jumping with excitement. Leon had gone down to set up the food and drinks. Once Phillip got Ant ready, they went to join him.

When they arrived, Leon's friend was already there, wearing swim trunks in a red and yellow Hawaiian print. Phillip would have looked him over thoroughly, but he couldn't turn his eyes away from Leon. He was wearing blue swim trunks and looking glorious, lean with broad shoulders and skin like honey. The taste and feel of his body came back to him in indecent flashes. Phillip would need to get that under control.

"No running," he warned Ant who couldn't wait to see what Leon had on the poolside table.

There were several tables scattered around next to recliners and folding chairs. Most of them just held a bottled water and a phone. Potted palms were spaced out along the walls. One wall of windows looked out into the courtyard and gave the poolroom some natural light.

There weren't too many other people there. A few residents were in the water, swimming laps and others were lounging. None of them were ready for a party except for their little group.

Getting closer, Phillip and Ant could see Leon's party setup. There were two colorful pitchers with drinks and a bowl with fruit on toothpicks as well as glasses with umbrellas sticking out of them. It was all very festive, and so was Leon's friend. He was laughing and gesturing like the party had already started. Ant stared from him to the table, as if he couldn't decide what was more interesting.

Leon interrupted Pavel mid sentence so he could make introductions. "OK, guys, this is Pavel. Though most bears are omnivorous, he only eats pizza."

"A bear?" Ant said and looked up at Pavel like he found that completely believable.

A blond with a big, sturdy body and a dynamic personality, Pavel shook Phillip's hand hard as Leon continued introductions.

"Me too. Me too," Ant said and offered his hand.

"This is Pavel. He's Katya's brother," Leon said.

"I like her!" Ant said.

"And this is Ant, the Ant-man," Leon said, and Ant got a big handshake but a gentle one.

Now Leon turned to Pavel. "OK. You've had an eyeful of my boyfriend. Now take back what you said," he demanded.

"Like I even know what I said." Pavel gave Phillip a once over as Leon glared. "Fine, I take it back," Pavel said and Leon was satisfied.

Joining Leon as he was filling up their glasses, Phillip took the opportunity to question him.

"What did Pavel say?" Phillip wanted to know. Not that he was insecure.

"He said 'Eh'." Leon looked displeased but didn't say anything else.

Phillip stared at him, waiting for more, but Leon seemed to think he fully answered his question. He went to serve the drinks, but first he had to tell Ant why there were pineapple and strawberry slices in his drink as well as an umbrella and a spiral straw.

"When you're sitting by the pool, you have to have fruity drinks with little umbrella's in them," Leon explained to Ant. "It's a rule."

"These are all virgins. Did you forget how to spike a drink?" Pavel asked him after he drank some and then poured himself a second glass from the other pitcher.

"We're here to teach a kid to swim. We need our wits about us," Leon told him.

"And I need a beer," Pavel grumbled.

"Do a belly flop so we can tell Ant that he should never, ever do one," Leon told him.

Pavel was game. He did the other swimmers the courtesy of yelling, "Belly flop!" before jumping in. The splash was impressive. When the geyser of water settled, Pavel was doing a slow backstroke and all the other swimmers were giving him dirty looks.

"Look at him, he floats like a cork," Leon said as Pavel bobbed in the middle of the pool.

"He's going to get us banned from the pool," Phillip said.

Looking around, Leon yelled, "Sorry everyone! He won't do it again!"

To start the swimming lesson, Phillip and Leon helped Ant put his water wings on and took him toward the edge of the pool. Leon jumped into the pool while Phillip sat with Ant on the edge.

"Are you nervous?" Phillip asked him.

"Maybe," Ant ducked his head. "The water is too big."

"We promise not to let go of you until you're ready, OK?" Leon told him.

"OK," Ant said, but he was still uncertain.

To ease him into it, Phillip stayed with him on the edge of the pool. Then Leon swam a few laps and Ant gave him a round of applause. Seeing how beautifully Leon swam and dived and how much fun Pavel had clowning around in the water, Ant couldn't stay on the sidelines. "It's not too big. Let's go in," he decided.

"Good for you," Leon praised him.

Phillip handed Ant to him and saw Leon hold on tightly to the little guy. Ant clung to him, his arms around Leon's neck until Phillip slipped into the water. He took Ant in his arms while Leon swam around them. Watching him swimming, Ant's fear eased. This time Leon showed off even more and made Ant smile.

"Swimming is fun if you know how to do it. Do you want to learn?" Phillip asked him.

Ant nodded without taking his eyes off Leon. In no time they had him dogpaddling back and forth between them and then to Pavel as well. Soon enough Ant forgot all about his fear of the water. He was splashing and kicking and laughing at Pavel's antics. Feeling much braver now, Ant would have taken off his water wings if Phillip let him.

"Next time," Phillip said.

"Can we bring the fishes here so they can swim in the pool?" Ant asked, but Phillip had to nix his bright idea.

"No. Sorry. It's the wrong kind of water. It would make them sick," Phillip explained.

"Can you picture this pool full of fish? How cool would that be?" Pavel said, getting excited about the idea. Then he did a back flip in the water and Ant clapped and splashed in approval.

Pavel was like a big kid. He swam with Ant riding on his back, hanging around his neck and shrieking. Having met him, Phillip was losing the last shreds of jealousy over his friendship with Leon. It was stupid to be jealous in the first place, but Phillip couldn't understand how anyone could know Leon and not want him desperately. His own desire was so overwhelming, it left him blind to any other man. All he saw was Leon, droplets of water on his skin and a big smile on his face.

Chapter 44

Leon considered the pool party a complete success. Ant took to swimming like a fish and Pavel had to eat his words about Phillip's hotness. As soon as they got back to the apartment, Ant bragged to the fish that he could swim too. He wanted to wear his water wings to bed and was making plans to go swimming again even as Phillip was trying to get him to go to sleep.

Leon had already said goodnight to Ant and texted with Pavel, who had decided his new requirement for a boyfriend was "Must have a pool". Now Leon just stared out the living room windows. A dark view dotted with stars and city lights filled his vision as he waited for Phillip.

Having finally put Ant to bed, Phillip came up behind Leon. Leon turned his head for a kiss as Phillip wrapped his arms around him. Locked in his embrace, Leon leaned back against him and let out a contented sigh.

"Should we go to bed too?" Phillip asked as he nuzzled Leon's neck.

Looking at the time on his phone, Leon was going to say it was way too early. On second thought, he decided that the idea sounded kind of promising.

They went to Phillip's bedroom with their arms around each other. The room was dark and Phillip turned on only one small lamp. To Leon the room was becoming familiar and welcoming, a place full of delights but also safe and comforting. This was where he found himself in the arms of a man who would never wrong him, never abandon him, and who wanted him so much he couldn't wait for a more adult bedtime.

Now that they were alone together in the dimly lit bedroom, Leon could give Phillip the attention he deserved. As Leon undressed him, Phillip tried to get him naked as well, but Leon stopped him.

"I can see that you're in a hurry, but I want you naked first," Leon told him.

"Be quick," Phillip demanded.

"Listen to you being bossy, like some kind of boss or something," Leon said while his fingers were busy with buttons.

Once Phillip's clothes were laying wherever they happened to land when Leon threw them aside, he just breathed for a moment and took in the sight of Phillip naked, hard and all his. He ran his hands over him, slowly tracing the contour of every muscle.

"So what has you so worked up?" Leon asked while giving him brief, teasing kisses.

"You," Phillip said as he stripped him. "You were giving me merman fantasies," Phillip told him.

"You have those?" Leon asked as he stood half naked in front of Phillip and pictured himself with a fish tail.

"Now I do. I find that I have all sorts of crazy thoughts around you," Phillip said and leaned down to kiss his chest. As Phillip's mouth reached his nipple, a shiver of pleasure ran through Leon. "You're too beautiful," Phillip told him

while looking up into his eyes intently.

The heated look took Leon's breath away. "Listen to you sweet-talking me. You live in a building with a pool. You don't need to sweet-talk me. Just invite me over."

"You have a standing invitation," Phillip told him and pushed him down on the bed.

He had left Leon's boxers on and now he slowly eased them over Leon's growing erection and down his legs. Phillip climbed on the bed too and kneeled over him. It didn't take much. A small lick here and a feathery caress there and Leon was on fire.

Every stray touch ignited his longing. His skin tingled and his body writhed, begging for more. His desire became unbearable and Phillip's name was constantly on his lips.

He only shut up when Phillip kissed his mouth. The kiss was smoldering but it didn't last. Phillip pulled away even as Leon's hands gripped his shoulders to hold him close. He moaned for more but Phillip only stared down at him.

Leon brushed his fingers across his lips, dying for another taste. In that kiss he could taste sweet love and searing passion. He couldn't get enough, but Phillip's lips moved on.

His kisses drifted down, soft and lazy. They blazed a path to Leon's cock, burning into him, branding him Phillip's forever. Then he took Leon's cock into his mouth and Leon forgot his own name. The wonderful suction melted his bones, but that ended too soon as well. Through his curses, Leon heard Phillip saying something.

"I want you to turn over." Low and seductive, Phillip's voice couldn't be ignored. Leon had to shut up and listen, and then obey.

Phillip kissed the back of his legs then gripped his ass. His voice deepened and rumbled through Leon's whole body as he told him, "I want to see how you like this. Do your best to relax."

Phillip was rubbing his back as he got into position, ass up, head down on the bed. Kissing his way along his spine, Phillip moved down the crack and to his hole. To hold his legs apart, Phillip pushed his arms between Leon's legs and hooked his hands at his hips.

His tongue flicked out and Leon gasped. Every lick sent a shiver through his body then Phillip's tongue pushed in. Leon's body twitched helplessly, charged by Phillip's intimate touch.

Did he like this? In the sense that it was driving him out of his fucking mind – yes. He didn't need to say it though. His constant moaning and near sobbing told Phillip how he felt. And with his arms wrapped around his legs, Phillip could feel him shudder after each thrust of his tongue.

Groaning and shaking Leon was begging mindlessly. He wanted Phillip's cock inside him. If Phillip wasn't holding him in place, Leon would have been sitting on his cock already.

Helpless to him, with no pride or reason left, Leon still managed not to

handle his own cock. He needed Phillip to make him come. If he didn't, he would die. In a raspy voice, he begged Phillip to fuck him.

"If you are sure," Phillip said, releasing his hold on him.

"I'm beyond fucking sure," Leon gasped. He didn't change position just turned his head. "I'm not just in love with you. I'm in love with the way you fuck, and I want you to be all mine."

"I am."

"Then show me," Leon demanded. "And I don't want you worrying about me. Just give me what I want."

"You talk tough," Phillip said, his voice a low, dangerous whisper.

Then he reached around and took hold of Leon's rock hard cock. He stroked it lightly and watched him pump into his hand and moan. Phillip let go and got them both ready. By the time he was done, Leon was a needy, pleading mess.

Finally feeling Phillip's cock at his hole, Leon held his breath and gripped the sheets tighter. His heartbeat was pounding in his ears. Phillips hands were moving over his thighs, rubbing his back. Then one hand hooked over Leon's shoulder and Phillip started to push in. Every inch sent Leon further out of his mind until Phillip was all the way inside him, filling him up. It was all too much and it was amazing.

"So good, fuck," Leon moaned. "I love you so much."

"I love you too," Phillip whispered as he pulled back for a thrust.

His hushed words of love only made Leon moan louder when the thrust came. That was the start of Phillip pounding him slow and hard. Leon felt like his bones were going to shake apart and he loved every minute of it. And when Phillip picked up speed, it got even better.

Phillip established a beautiful rhythm that pleased every inch of Leon's body. Leon was rising on a current of pleasure that was coming straight from Phillip and sending him higher with each thrust.

When Phillip grunted his name, Leon knew he was close. He took hold of Leon's erection and pumped in time with the hammering of his cock inside him. With his cock in Phillip's strong fist, Leon couldn't take any more. His grip was tight and electrifying. The pounding Leon was receiving blew his mind. It sent him right over the edge. In the next second, Leon was coming hard and Phillip was right there with him, moaning his release and calling his name.

Panting and spent, Leon reached back but Phillip didn't let himself drop on top of him. He rolled off and settled against Leon's side. They were sweat drenched and satisfied, caressing each other as they came down.

If they could only stay like this, but they had to make themselves decent and the bed too. After they did all that, they weren't even sleepy any more. They went to have snacks, snuggle on the couch and watch bad TV. It didn't matter what they did. They were close. They were holding each other. It was like they were still making love.

Chapter 45

On the day of his birthday, Leon was nervous, but he tried not to pass on his discomfort to Phillip and Ant. There was the boat trip tomorrow to look forward to, so he focused on that. Still, they had to get through his birthday shindig first.

They got on the road late in the day. The drive was nice and scenic as they skirted Danning proper to get to the suburb. That meant that Leon didn't see much to trigger his memories and that wasn't a bad start.

The suburb where his mother now lived was sprawling with big lawns and old, ranch style homes that had seen better days. Whatever its flaws, the neighborhood was way better than any place they ever lived during his childhood.

It was early evening when they arrived and the light to the west was already turning ruddy. White clouds were burning orange and red, and Leon made sure to point them out to Ant and tell him it was a magic trick.

As they were getting out of Phillip's car a few blocks from the house, Leon warned Phillip about what to expect. "It's not going to be a diverse or accepting crowd. But we won't be staying long."

Phillip looked like he was preparing himself for the worst, but Ant couldn't wait to be released from his car seat. To him, a party was a party.

There were vehicles parked up and down the street and in front of the beige house that Leon hardly ever visited. A wooden fence surrounded a huge back yard. That's where everyone had gathered.

As soon as they turned the corner into the back yard, they smelled the barbeque smoke. People Leon barely knew were milling around with drinks in their hands. Sighing, Leon looked over at Phillip and Ant. Ant still looked excited, but it was clear that Phillip was fully aware that he wasn't among friends. Leon was seeing a steely-eyed expression that he never got to see. He knew it was for his sake and it made him smile.

Moving among the guests, Leon looked around for his mother and stepfather. He greeted a few people along the way and introduced Phillip and Ant to them. They were a hit with most of the female guests, but a few of the guys gave them hostile looks. One guy was shooting them a particularly nasty stink-eye and Leon gave him one right back. Then he gave him another one for Phillip and one more just for the hell of it.

Leon finally spotted his mom and Gary as they came out of the house carrying bags of ice and hamburger and hotdog buns. The introductions were brief and no one was happy to meet anyone. Phillip was cold and formal, and even Ant didn't warm up to Leon's mom and Gary. As for his mother, she wanted a private word with Leon.

She pulled him off to the side. "Why did you bring him?" his mother asked

and gave Phillip a mean side-eye.

It was a complaint, not a question, but Leon decided to answer her anyway. "He's my boyfriend and my boss, and it's my birthday so there's three reasons for you."

"Well, Gary's people aren't the sort to put up with that sort of thing," she said and looked around her like she was embarrassed.

"We'll try not to dry hump each other too hard in front of the kiddies," Leon told her. He was damn proud to be with Phillip, and he didn't give a crap what she or anyone else thought.

"You better watch your mouth. Gary won't tolerate..."

Leon walked away before she could finish. He would have walked right out of there if Ant wasn't busy watching a squirrel try to get into a birdfeeder. Two little girls were with him. They were yelling at the squirrel, "That's not for you", but the squirrel did not listen.

Ant might be having a good time, but Phillip definitely wasn't. His face was as grim as if they were at a funeral. Leon was so grateful to him for coming along and making the event bearable.

Neither one of them was enjoying the party, but tomorrow would make up for it. Actually all the tomorrows with Phillip would make up for all the days Leon spent feeling alone and miserable, his hope draining away. Nothing could bring him down as long as Phillip was by his side.

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As he met her, Phillip was relieved to see that Leon didn't look much like his mother. He must take after his father, not the petite blond woman who gave Phillip a tight-lipped smile. Knowing that she had neglected her son and allowed him to be abused made Phillip hate her, but for Leon's sake, he was polite to her and even her husband.

After Phillip was introduced to Leon's mother and stepfather, he didn't have much to say to them or they to him. Leon's mother did want to have a word with Leon though.

Stepping away, Phillip gritted his teeth in frustration and pretended not to hear her as she harangued Leon. In the meantime, an older boy had approached Ant and was circling him. Just as Phillip went closer to keep an eye on Ant, Leon came to join him.

"Busy being overprotective?" Leon asked in a whisper.

"Yes," Phillip admitted readily. He watched Ant and that other boy like a hawk.

"You a girl or what?" the older boy asked Ant.

"I'm a boy," Ant said evenly. The question didn't seem to bother him and neither did the boy's sneering tone.

"Then why is your hair so stupid?" the boy said.

"My hair is good, like Leon's hair. Leon is a lion, and lions have big hair.

Ant-man! Lion-man!" Ant prattled on like only he could.

"You're a weirdo," the boy said.

"You're a weirdo," Ant retorted flatly. He didn't seem upset, but Phillip decided the boy had gone far enough. Waiting until he had the boy's attention, Phillip glared at him. The boy moved away from Ant. Ant didn't notice anything, but Leon did.

"Did you make that little twerp run off just by staring him down?" Leon said. He obviously approved.

The two girls were now drawing on the wooden fence with chalk. One of them broke off a piece and gave it to Ant. Since he was still having fun, Phillip and Leon couldn't bring themselves to leave. Then somehow they ended up talking to the girls' mother and another woman, and they seemed nice. But it wasn't long before Phillip heard Ant yelling.

Turning, he saw Ant jump and scream as some older boys laughed at him. Instantly, Phillip was fuming. When he and Leon went over to see to Ant, the boys retreated.

"A mean boy throwed a worm on me," Ant said as he shook his head to dislodge the worm.

"Hold still," Phillip told him.

"Those little shits," Leon said under his breath as he watched the preteen boys where they went to huddle by some bushes.

Phillip gently pulled a green centipede from Ant's hair. "I got him," he said and showed the centipede to Ant.

"It's green," Ant said. "Can I keep him?"

"For a little while, but be careful with him." Phillip let the centipede crawl from his hand to Ant's.

Seeing this, the two little girls came over to get a closer look and to squeal. That's when Leon walked off. Phillip saw him go up to the group of preteens who thought it was fun to mess with a three-year-old.

Just as Leon approached the kids, two men accosted him. One was heavyset, the other one taller and more muscular. To Phillip, their demeanor didn't seem friendly so he went to back up Leon.

Getting closer, Phillip recognized the guys as some of those who had given him and Leon hostile looks when they first arrived. Now they were sneering at Leon.

"What's your problem, goldilocks?" the taller man said to Leon. "It's just boys being boys, but you wouldn't know anything about that."

"Actually, DJ, I would know a lot about that," Leon said and smirked suggestively.

DJ's expression turned darker. "You're filth and everybody knows it. You keep your hands to yourself around those boys. You even look at them funny, and I'll knock your teeth down your throat."

His threat was bad enough, but DJ really shouldn't have taken that step

toward Leon. When he shoved Leon, forcing him to take a step back, Phillip's anger boiled over. He saw Leon's fist clench, but his own was faster.

Phillip's right shot out like it had a mind of its own and connected with DJ's jaw. DJ's head spun to the left. His teeth snapped, shutting his mouth. He staggered back and landed on his ass in the lawn.

That's when the other man moved. Leon stepped in, but Phillip didn't let him get between them. As he evaded the man's clumsy punch, Phillip took advantage of his failure and landed two neat jabs that bloodied his nose.

Out of the corner of his eye, Phillip saw DJ getting up. Phillip could tell from his crouching stance and the placement of his hand on the ground that he planned to launch himself up at him. Leon saw it too, and he got in his way. Shifting to the side at the last second, he avoided a collision with DJ's fist and got him in the ribs with a raised knee.

Even if DJ missed, Phillip's stomach clenched as he saw his fist fly by Leon's head. At the moment, Phillip was also keeping an eye on DJ's friend who was looking for an opening. DJ was doubled over in the grass but already trying to get to his feet. Leon was ready to get into it as well when his stepfather stepped in.

He had made his way through the crowd that had gathered to watch and jeer. "That's enough of that," Gary said. He motioned for some guys to keep DJ and his friend back while he pulled Leon aside and told him. "Now, I'm not saying it's all your fault, but it would be best if you get your friend, or whatever, out of here."

"Gladly," Leon said bitterly.

Phillip looked at Leon's stepfather with distaste but said nothing. He didn't want to make things any worse. Plus he had Ant to worry about.

"Tell me Ant didn't see that," he said to Leon as they went to collect Ant. "He can't see me doing something like that." Now that it was too late, Phillip was worried about the bad example he was setting for him.

"Too many people were standing around for him to be able to see," Leon said and Phillip breathed a sigh of relief. "But I think those girls are telling him about it right now."

Just as Leon said, the two girls were talking excitedly and miming punches for Ant's benefit.

"Oh, God. I'm sorry about this," Phillip said. "I should have found a better way to handle the situation."

Leon dismissed his apology. "Step-cousins are for punching. What else are they good for?" Leon might not mind but Ant didn't agree.

Once they were standing in front of him, he let them have it. With a grave face, Ant lectured, "Fighting is bad."

"Yes, it is," Phillip agreed. "I'm sorry." He was relieved that Ant didn't approve of his display of violence, but Leon still came to his defense.

"Your uncle didn't start it. DJ did. It's OK for a guy to defend..."

"Fighting is bad," And repeated and frowned at Leon until he agreed with

him.

"Yes. Fighting is bad."

Once Leon said that, Ant nodded with approval and smiled at both him and Phillip.

"I guess he told me," Leon said to Phillip as they left the party.

"Yes, he did. He's my sweet, gentle boy."

On their way to the car, Phillip looked over at Leon to make sure he was OK about the way things turned out. He seemed fine. Leon even smiled at him, but then he noticed that Phillip was rubbing his hand and he frowned.

As for Ant, he only had good things to say. "It was a big party."

"Yes, it was big," Phillip agreed. He did wonder if there was supposed to be a cake. Good thing he had one waiting for Leon at home.

Leon insisted on driving and stopped to get Phillip some ice for his hand and a grape Popsicle for Ant. Glancing over at Phillip as he got back on the road again, Leon shot him a bright-eyed look and a smile. After a party like that, he could still look so happy.

It didn't add up, but Phillip felt the same way. Leon behind the wheel, Ant in the back seat making a mess of himself, and Phillip nursing an aching hand – they were their own world. Speeding through the darkening streets, they watched lampposts coming on to light their path as they headed home.

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At Phillip's, Leon found gifts and a cake waiting for him. Phillip brought out the cake all lit up, and Ant helped blow out the candles. Ant had the best time and his high spirits were infectious. Leon had never had a better birthday.

After Ant was in bed, Leon had to work on convincing Phillip of that.

"Sorry I got you kicked out of your own birthday party," he said as he took Leon in his arms.

"You're a bad boy alright, but my real birthday party was right here," Leon said and gave him a kiss. But he did want to know what was going through his mind. "How come you punched him?" It seemed so hard to believe that his civilized, gentlemanly Phillip had this other side to him.

"I had to especially when it looked like you were about to," Phillip told him, and he was right about that. Leon had been ready to swing at DJ when Phillip's fist went right past his head and knocked that idiot on his ass.

"I did always want a guy who would fight for me, but now you have a happy boyfriend and a hand that hurts." Leon took hold of his hand and kissed the bruised knuckles.

"I only care about that first thing," Phillip whispered.

"Then I guess you don't need me to make you feel better," Leon said wickedly.

"Come over here," Phillip said and pulled him into a tight, passionate

embrace.

Chapter 46

Sunday morning Phillip, Leon and Ant drove down to Danning. Crossing the bridge over the Tekeniohneka River, they headed to the west bank and parked near the docks. Lined up the along the wharf, fishing boats and motorboats bobbed on the water.

Phillip and Leon carried coolers and duffel bags for their trip down the river. They stopped where a small boat was docked and set down their supplies. The boat looked old and had a tiny, partially enclosed cabin. It was dingy white with red trim. Ant loved it at first sight.

Phillip wasn't so sure. "How old is this thing?"

"I don't know," Leon said as he admired the small vessel. "Depends on which parts you're talking about. Those cushions are pretty new," he said, pointing to the bright blue seat cushions on the white bench. "I think the engine was replaced at some point. The rest is circa 1970's." Seeing how Phillip looked at him, Leon assured him, "It will float."

Phillip nodded and then put the bright orange life vest on Ant. All suited up, Ant celebrated by jumping up and down, his feet bouncing on the planks of the dock. He wasn't that close to the water, but Phillip still kept hold of him.

Leon told them more about the little boat, "It belongs to my friend Randal. He's pretty much my only friend from Danning. The boat used to be his dad's. The way Randal tells it, his dad divorced his mom so he could marry this boat. He was crazy for fishing and Randal went with him all the time. When I was a kid, I was so jealous of him. He would go up the river with his dad, and by then, I never even saw mine. But the bottom line is quality father son time happened on this boat so let's continue that tradition," Leon said with a big smile.

Ant didn't follow much of that, but he was eager to get on board and start their adventure. The small craft rocked on the water and strained against the ropes that tied it to the pier. Phillip handed Ant off to Leon, then stepped on the deck himself. Once they were all on board, Phillip held onto him tightly while he looked over the side.

It got very noisy when Leon started the engine up and the boat shook. Ant jumped at the sound and clung to Phillip, but then the boat started moving and Ant got excited.

"Are you scared?" Leon asked him over the noise.

"I was. But then I was brave like Uncle Phillip."

"I'm taking lots of pictures. We'll send them to your Gran-gran. She'll be so proud of you," Phillip told him as he got out his phone and started snapping away.

With Leon at the controls, the boat chugged along, its noise throaty but not unpleasant. They were heading upstream first then back downstream. It was a more picaresque route as they were leaving behind commercial docks, disused

waterfront warehouses and shuttered factories.

Here the river narrowed and nature replaced industry, for a while anyway. Further downstream Tekeniohneka river was joined with Karahkwa river making a wider waterway. But here both banks seemed within reach.

Dense with trees and shrubs, they were overflowing with green. Ant kept peering into the overgrown banks of the river as if he wondered what creatures might be hiding there. A rustling in the bushes caught his attention.

"All sorts of things are happening out there. Maybe we'll see some squirrels, or we might see some of those goats up in the trees," Leon told him.

Ant nodded. Since he didn't find anything strange about what Leon said, he grew suspicious.

"Ant, do you know what goats are?" Leon asked him.

"They are birds," Ant said right away.

"Because they're in the trees?"

Ant nodded.

"Can't fault his logic," Leon said with a laugh, but Phillip couldn't leave it at that. Instead of letting him believe that goats were birds, he got out his phone and looked up some pictures.

"These are goats," he said as he showed them to Ant.

Seeing the pictures, Ant looked at Leon accusingly.

Phillip showed him another picture. "And these are the goats in the trees."

"Where are they?" Ant asked and looked all around.

"I'm not a hundred percent convinced they are real, but according to this, they're found in North Africa," Phillip told him.

"Let's go there," Ant said, ready to go right now.

"That's far away, but maybe one day," Phillip told him. "We'll go lots of places. We'll take boats and planes and trains and have lots of adventures."

Hearing his promise, Ant's eyes lit up. "With Leon," he added.

"Of course with Leon." Phillip couldn't imagine being without him. He didn't know how he had survived without him until now, how he took even one breath in that dark time before they met.

Further up the river, Phillip and Ant both got to drive the boat for a while. Phillip took dozens of pictures of Ant at the wheel. The boat moved at a leisurely pace allowing them to take a good look around. Both banks were like a jungle. The vegetation spilled over with branches that dipped down into the water. Surrounded by dense and mysterious greenery, Ant wanted to be on both sides of the boat at once so he could see everything. Whenever other boats passed them, Ant waved at them.

They anchored for their picnic lunch, choosing a spot near a huge tree with branches that reached almost halfway across the river. They couldn't get to shore from there unless they wanted to swim for it.

"I know how to swim," Ant said, but they stayed on board and enjoyed the

scenery, the sandwiches and sodas.

After getting under way, Phillip noticed a change in the weather. The wind had picked up, whipping up the waves into sharp peaks. On the shore things were no longer tranquil. The boughs shivered in the stiff breeze. The leaves folded over, their pale undersides showing. Crumpled white flowers flew into the water.

At one point the wind died down. That's when swarms of tiny flies filled the air. That prompted Leon to warn Ant to close his mouth. Low dark clouds heavy with rain passed overhead slowly, covering the sun. Then it started to rain, drops bouncing off the gray water and tapping on the deck.

Leon stopped the engine and they all huddled under the canvas cover to wait out the rain. Then Leon had an idea. "We'll have to eat this before it gets wet," he said as he got a box out of one of the coolers.

Ant watched with big eyes as Leon unpacked a small cake. "Another cake!"

"This one is a boat cake," Leon told him as he sliced it and Phillip got out some paper plates.

Ant gave the cake a questioning look then he looked at Leon.

"It's not a cake that looks like a boat. That's just where we eat it," Leon explained.

Once they each had a slice, Leon started singing, "Someone left the cake out in the rain." He was doing a very bad job of it too, not that the song deserved better. He only knew a few of the lines, but he taught them to Ant and they sang it together while waiting out the rain.

The sun came out before the rain stopped. The clouds were dispersing but not gone as sunshine bounced off the water and dazzled Ant's eyes. He shielded them with both his hands as he squinted.

"It's sunning and it's raining!" Ant said and looked up at the sky.

"That means there's probably a rainbow lurking around somewhere," Leon predicted.

Ant looked for it, craning his neck. To help him out, Leon swung him up and put him on his shoulders. Laughing in surprise, Ant hung on to Leon's hair. They didn't find that rainbow but Ant had fun anyway. Phillip watched them laughing together and he felt like his heart would burst with all the love that filled it.

After they moved on again, their journey brought them to the point where Leon planned to turn the boat around. They passed under a bridge and waved at some people fishing on the shore.

As they headed downstream they passed the same spots but noticed new sights along the way. There was a wedding going on in a huge back yard that sloped down toward the shore. When Leon stopped the boat so they could watch the happy couple cut the cake, Phillip put his arms around him.

Watching that wedding as uninvited guests gave Phillip all sorts of ideas, and Leon seemed to know it. He shot Phillip a sideways glance.

"One day that's going to be us," Phillip said to him.

"That's where we're heading alright," Leon agreed.

Right now that was as good as a yes. Phillip could already see them married, honeymooning in Italy, standing under that lemon tree in Moe and Franny's garden. They might rent a boat and explore the Mediterranean coastline together.

"The birds are happy," Ant said hearing them sing and watching them fly up from the trees.

They were on their way again. Raindrops clung to the spider webs on the riverbank and made them sparkle. Back in full force, the sun glinted off the waves. The gleaming surface of the water was broken now and then by jumping fish. After a splash, they were gone leaving small ripples. Enchanted by the jumping fish, Ant kept reaching for them while Phillip held on to him protectively.

To Phillip's eyes, everything seemed painfully bright, like the beauty of a sunny day was too much to take in. Gray, rain filled clouds had their own somber beauty, which was more Phillip's style. But as he looked up, Phillip saw that the last of the clouds were dispersing, trailing their wispy edges after them like hems of tattered coats. Seeing him looking up, Ant raised his face to the sky too. Gazing at him like that, Phillip had to smile. Ant was as bright as the sun.

Lost in a reverie, Phillip was surprised when they passed up the dock where they had started. That's where their boat excursion was supposed to end.

"I can keep the boat till tomorrow morning. We have plenty of food. How about making this an overnight outing?" Leon proposed.

Ant didn't understand the question but once they explained to him that it meant he would get to sleep on the boat, he was all for it. They were all on the same page – they never wanted their journey to end.

South of Danning, the river got wider and the boats bigger. There were a lot more buildings close to the water instead of the vegetation further north. They could see a lot more people too, and Ant waved at everything and everyone.

Out there, Phillip didn't see much to interest him. But looking over at Leon, his hair whipped back by the wind, Phillip felt the pang of falling in love with him even more. Leon's grip on his heart was always tightening, exquisitely painful and rapturous, never letting up. That much love could destroy him if he didn't look away.

Though they had enough food to throw together a decent dinner, Phillip insisted they stop at a riverside spot. He wanted to spoil Leon whenever he

got the chance. They anchored at the pier where Tekeniohneka and Karahkwa rivers joined. Taking an outdoor table at the Two Rivers Restaurant, they watched the shadows lengthen as evening neared.

Clouds covered the sky to the west like a fluffy flock of sheep. The setting sun turned them gold then reddish orange. Phillip never got tired of the way Leon's eyes changed color as sunlight turned brassy and shadows deepened. When he turned that beautiful gaze on Phillip, he might as well have trained a weapon on him. He was done for.

Once back on the boat, Leon took them further down the river. He turned into a waterway on the east bank that Phillip hadn't noticed. The woods and the bend in the river hid it from sight. The channel widened further on and they saw a small crescent shaped lake. Its widest part was encircled by a pine forest. On the other side, cultivated fields fanned out from the shore. Green stalks in perfect rows were just starting to grow. Two rowboats had been beached there, but their own boat had to stay away from the shore.

"We can't get closer unless we want to get stuck," Leon told them. "This place is called Half Lake because it looks like half a lake, I guess." Leon shrugged. This was where they were stopping for the night.

Phillip and Leon got things ready to spend the night while Ant pretended to fish. They finished off the cake and watched the tranquil world around them get swallowed by the night. Overhead, they could see small birds playfully chasing each other across the darkening blue of the sky.

Night came first to the pine forest where ferns grew under the big trees. Then darkness swept over the sky. Stars came out and Ant tried to count them even though he could only count to ten.

"Ten!" he announced holding up the fingers on both of his hands. "Ten stars."

"I think you might need to use your toes," Leon told him.

Phillip and Leon had pulled the cushions off the bench and put down some tarp and some blankets. They all stretched out on the deck. Ant leaned back between them and he was soon asleep.

With the water smooth and calm, it was like they were carried on a wave of molten silver. The boat creaked as it rocked softly and small waves splashed against the hull. A pleasant, resinous scent wafted in from the pines.

Phillip reached over and let his fingers become lost in Leon's wind tangled hair. He was filled with the ache of loving Leon so much. He wanted to show him that love so badly, but there was no relief in sight, no chance of slamming into his body like a madman, not tonight.

It didn't have to be now. The nights ahead of them were endless, as countless as stars in a clear night sky. That's what this day and this night were about – a wordless promise for the future. The adoption was under way, and he had Leon in his life. Was there really this much happiness in the world?

"I never expected this," Phillip admitted. His voice was low, but in the quiet of the night it carried.

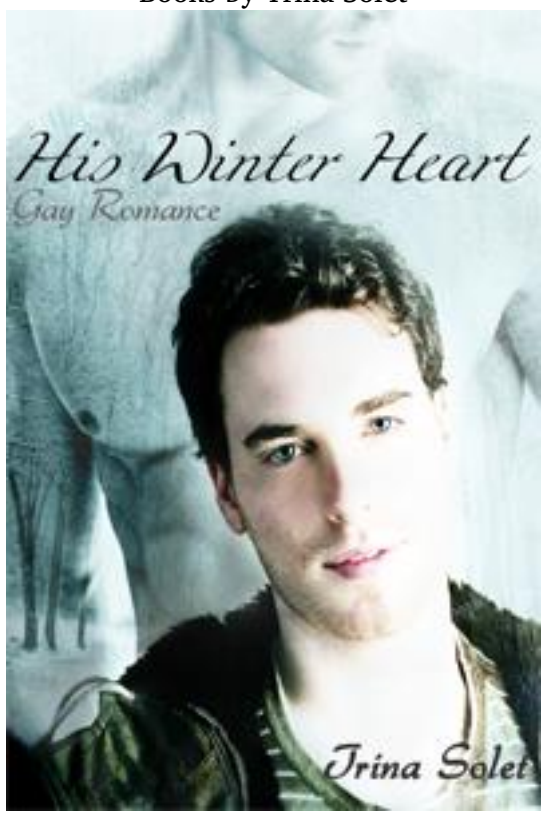
"I didn't either," Leon said. "My future always seemed so murky, clouded by my past. Now I can see it clearly. I want to be with you."

As Leon turned to gaze at him, Phillip felt tears come into his eyes and his chest tighten. He was so desperately in love that simply looking at Leon fully like this hurt. "Be my future. Be my everything." His words were breathless and low, trying to express a love that tore him apart even as this man made him whole.

At first Leon only leaned in for a deep, soft kiss. Drawing back, he swallowed hard then bit his lip before he answered. "Yes. For as long as you'll have me, I'm yours."

The End

Books by Trina Solet



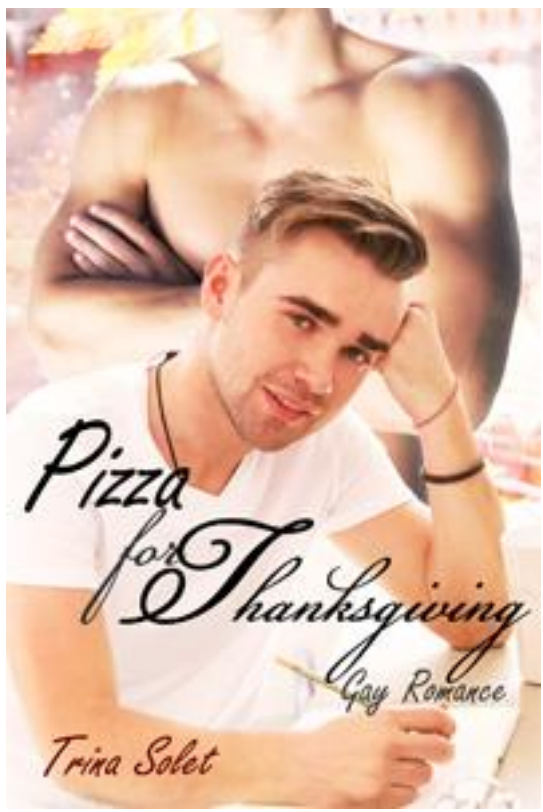
His Winter Heart

Wes is living a lonely, stark existence when he meets Colin, a lively young guy in desperate circumstances. Wes is so taken with him that he has to have him. His decision to invite Colin to spend the night is going to turn his quiet life upside down.

Colin almost finds himself sleeping on the street. When the tall, blond man makes him an offer, he can't say no either to the money or to the man. Colin is impulsive and full of contradictions. He refuses to sell himself for money and ends up homeless because of it. But when Wes offers to pay him for sex, Colin jumps at the chance to go home with him. Something about Wes strikes a chord with Colin. He knows there is a warm heart under the serious, impassive exterior and an awesome body under all the layers of winter clothes.

Things don't go as planned when Wes decides that Colin is too young and inexperienced and refuses to sleep with him. That doesn't mean that he can stay away from someone who shakes up his world.

The more time Colin spends with Wes, the more he wants him. Colin isn't shy about getting what he wants. His relentless pursuit might pay off if Wes doesn't let family complications and his fears about the future keep them apart. Will Wes let go of his inhibitions and allow himself to love the younger man?

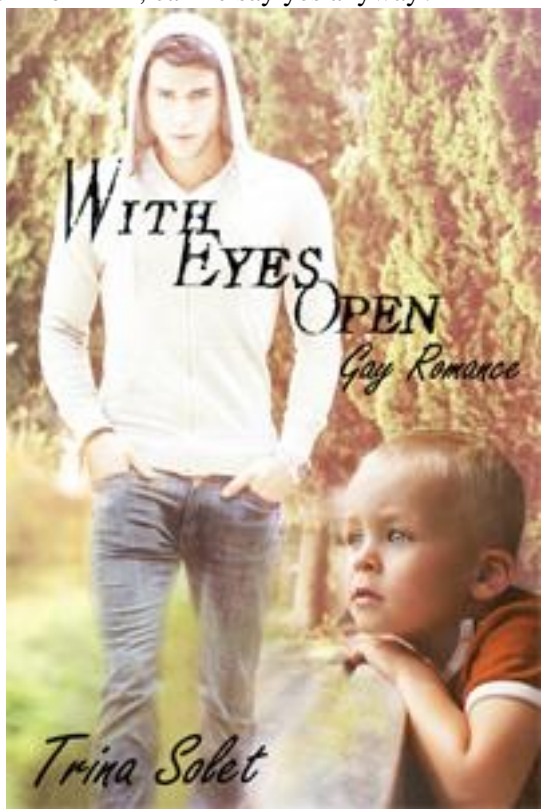


Pizza for Thanksgiving

Mack and Enzo are roommates and nothing more. While sharing the same apartment, they live separate lives. Enzo is sweet but painfully shy. Mack is gruff and kind of intimidating. He's had a hard life and doesn't let his guard down easily.

Now Mack is anticipating a lonely Thanksgiving dinner, but Enzo won't let that happen. When he hears that Mack is going to be all alone for Thanksgiving, he gets up the courage to make him an offer. But things don't go as planned in more ways than one.

With the best of intentions, Enzo has woken up something in Mack that he might not be ready for. Can Mack stop hiding and holding back? When Enzo asks for too much from him, can he say yes anyway?



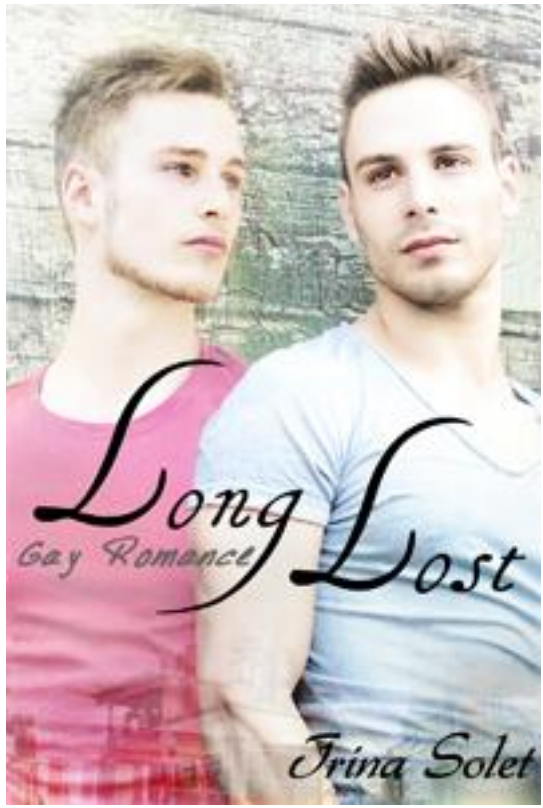
With Eyes Open

Jacob and his son, Toby, have just moved to a small town. Everything is going well so far, except for one thing – who is Toby talking to in the back garden? There's no one there.

Ian is wondering the same thing. He's taking time off from college to be with his dad. One day he sees the little boy acting strangely, and he decides to look into it.

While Ian is trying to solve the mystery of what Toby is seeing, he and Jacob grow closer. Jacob is a man Ian can trust and lean on at a difficult time. Jacob has some reservations about Ian, but his feelings are too strong to be denied. Even as unexplained events surround them, these two can't stay away from each other.

Good thing because when Ian finds the answers he's looking for, he's going to need Jacob more than ever.



Long Lost

Blake Adler is back in town on a mission. Years ago Blake's father cut him out of his life so completely that he never spoke of him. Now that his father has passed away, Blake finally gets to meet his younger brother and sister. But Blake didn't come back to Meadowview for a reunion with his lost family. He's desperate to find the man he can't live without and win back the love he threw away.

Blake and Reese were once best friends. They could have been more, but Blake screwed up the most important relationship of his life. Now he wants to fix things with Reese, if he can only find him.

Blake isn't the only one looking for Reese. No matter how far Reese runs, trouble follows him. Wild and vulnerable, he always had it rough. The one good thing in his life was Blake.

Now Reese is taking a big risk coming back to town. It might be worth it if he can reclaim the man he can't stop thinking about, the one who rejected him, the one he loves more than anyone.

Golden Days

How can a nerdy, young dad hope to attract his hunky new neighbor? And if he can get his attention, does he have any hope of making it last?

Kyle only recently became an adoptive father to a vulnerable little girl. He's a devoted dad, and Viv is a spirited and loving five-year-old. With the help of his little dog, Kyle worked hard to gain Viv's love and trust in record time. Now they are a family. That doesn't mean he has no room for a man in his life.

Luke has been working in a string of nightclubs for most of his adult life. It was an exciting life, but Luke had enough of it. A recent loss sends Luke into suburbia in search of a more peaceful life. The loss of his brother is still fresh, but spending time with Kyle and Viv brings him so much joy.

In the past, Kyle hasn't been lucky in love. He always goes for the wrong kind of guy. But with Viv in his life, he can't afford those kinds of mistakes.

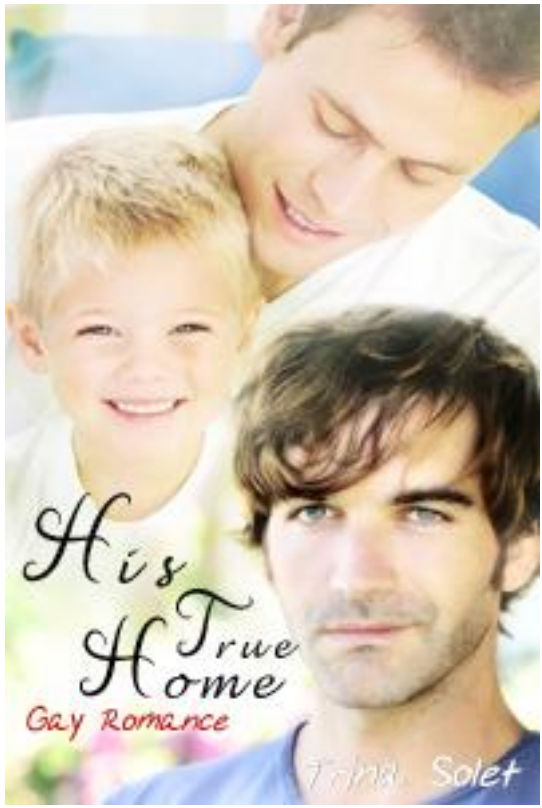
When Luke moves into the neighborhood, Kyle ends up with two wounded souls on his hands. Good thing he has room in his heart for both of them. If Kyle can get past his fears, he might just get everything he has always dreamed of.

Where He Belongs

Jack thought he had everything only to end up without a wife, a best friend or a child. Now he is closed off and afraid to love. After despair nearly cost him his life, he can't afford another heartbreak. Burying himself in work, Jack has made business his whole life. Now a business opportunity has led him to Gus, the one man who can break down his defenses.

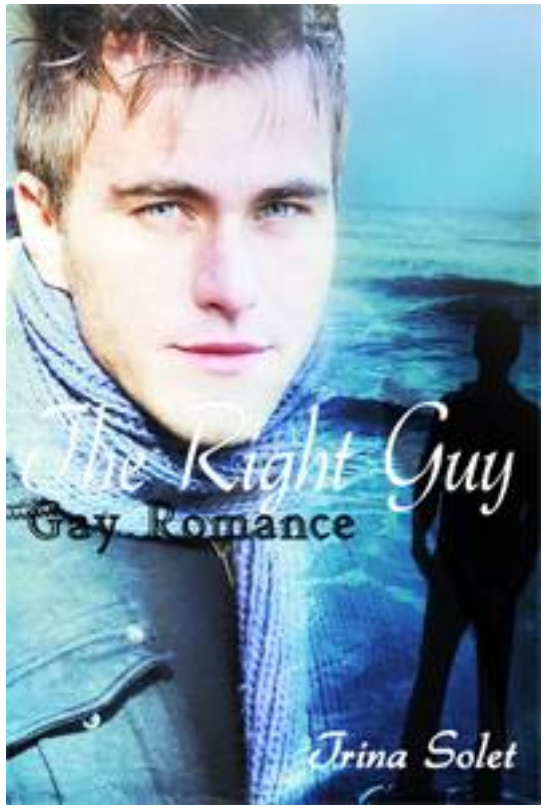
Gus doesn't know what he is getting himself into when he flirts with his new boss. The uptight younger man is irresistible to him. Is Gus being reckless when he falls for Jack despite all the warning signs? After all, Gus is a happy, single father to a little boy, and Josh is a happy kid.

As he is drawn into their lives, Jack finds that Gus and his little boy are everything he needs and what he is most afraid of. Jack can't risk his heart again, but he might be won over by these two goofballs despite himself.



His True Home

Alec has retreated to his childhood home after a life of too much fun. When a little boy is abandoned on the road leading to Alec's home town of Seaview Pines, Alec is the one who ends up taking care of him. Now Cory is on his way to join them. He was abandoned by his mother as well and wants to give Teddy, his little brother, the family he never had. As they spend time together, it's up to Cory to draw out the serious, silent little boy. He also has to convince Alec that his home town isn't just a temporary refuge. It's where all three of them belong.



The Right Guy

They came together in paradise, but what will happen when they go back to the real world and their everyday lives?

Nathan and Paul never liked each other. Paul was a snob, and Nathan felt like he was always looking down on him. Nathan wasn't interested in him anyway. He had his sights set on Turner. Now that Turner is getting married to another man, Nathan's heart is breaking. That's when he finds that Paul is right there by his side. This gorgeous man is ready to distract him and help him get over his unrequited crush.

After being with Paul, Nathan is finally ready to move on and let go of his hopeless feelings. But after a hot encounter on the beach, Nathan might be giving up his old crush for a new one. Knowing that his longing for Paul is just as hopeless, Nathan is at his wit's end.

But things aren't the way they seem. Paul has been watching Nathan pine after his friend for too long. All that time he has wanted Nathan all to himself. It's hard for Paul to believe that Nathan could ever return his feelings. After all, Nathan doesn't even like him.

He doesn't know that Nathan feels differently about him these days. When spending time with Paul stirs unexpected feelings that are more than lust, Nathan wonders if he misjudged this man. Could Paul be the right man for him? After chasing the wrong guy for so long, Nathan has to prove to Paul

that his feelings are real. That won't be easy. Paul isn't the most reasonable guy, and he won't settle for anything less from Nathan than his whole heart.

A Christmas Boyfriend

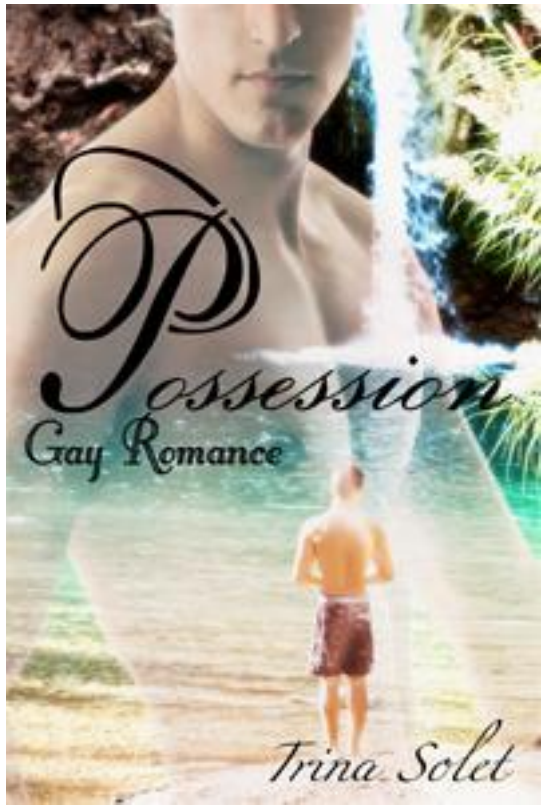
"Can you get me a man for Christmas?"

When he said those fateful words, Ben didn't know what he was setting in motion.

Ben is a busy dad to a four year old little girl. He doesn't have much time for a social life, but he wasn't serious when he asked for a man for Christmas. His daughter, Maya, doesn't know that. She is determined to play Santa and get her dad the gift he asked for.

The man she picks for her dad is her preschool teacher, Jason Kenney. Neither Jason nor Maya think he's the right man to be a present for Ben, so why is he standing there on Christmas Eve with a gift bow in his hair?

Smarting from a recent breakup, Jason isn't looking forward to the holidays. Despite his reservations, Jason gets tangled up with Ben. There is something about Ben that he just can't resist. As their feelings intensify, will spending Christmas together turn into something more?



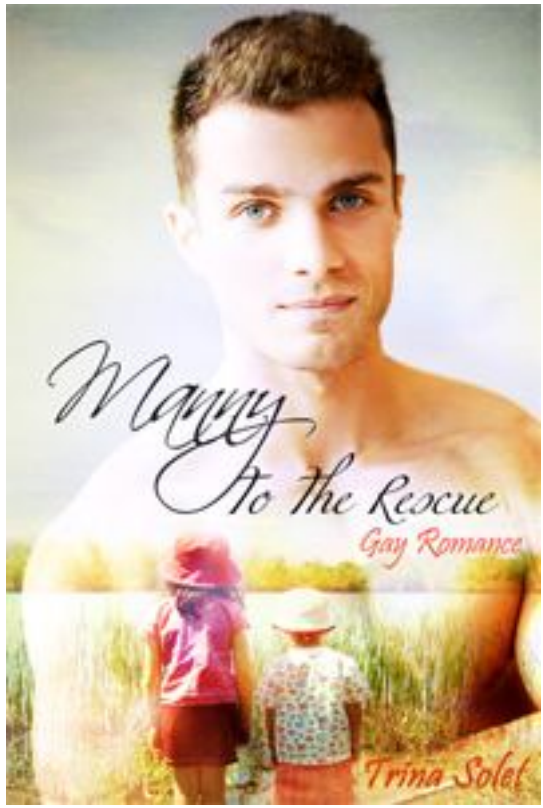
Possession

While looking for solitude, James finds love.

As soon as he arrives at the secluded, tropical villa, James knows he has found the ideal spot. Tranquil and remote, this place is just what he needs to get over a painful breakup. In perfect solitude, James's heart can begin to heal. But what if his solitude isn't so perfect, and Rob is. He is the young man who intrudes on James's privacy and steals his heart.

Rob is too much of a temptation for the cautious and uptight James. Even as he gives in to his desire, James reminds himself that this is just a vacation fling. Then why is the thought of leaving Rob tearing him apart? He can't get enough of the younger man. Once James has his body, he can't live without having his heart.

James thinks his yearning is hopeless. Then a revelation about Rob's circumstances changes everything. Will James have the courage to act on his feelings? He has to. This is his chance to have Rob, to give him the life he deserves and to truly love him.

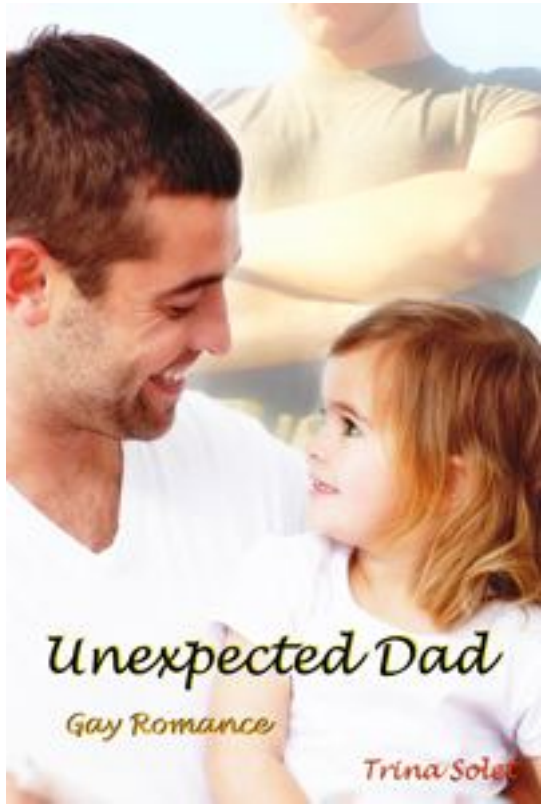


Manny To The Rescue

Why would Owen be terrified of Connie and Maggie, his two adorable little nieces? Because he is about to be left alone with them. Owen thinks he is going to have to take care of his nieces by himself until Dan shows up. If Owen approves, Dan is ready to be the girls' manny. Right from the start, Dan is a big help and an even bigger temptation. And Owen isn't the only one being tempted. When he was younger, Dan had a crush on Owen. Now that he is living with him, Owen has never looked hotter. The crush is back in full force. Too bad Dan isn't the kind of guy Owen is into. But even a hint that he is interested might spur Dan to make a move. Unfortunately, Dan is bringing trouble with him, and he doesn't even know it. When Owen becomes a target, will Dan be there in time to save him?

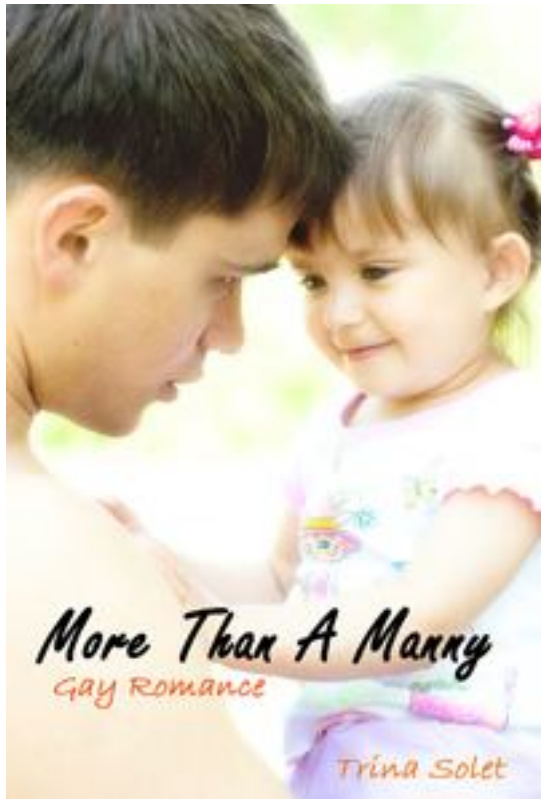
And Manny Makes Three

Mark is a struggling college student who has been working as a nanny for a nice family, but they don't need him any more. Zack has been raising his son, Al, by himself and needs help. Al is a funny kid, and Zack is a funny dad, but more serious issues lurk under the surface. Will Mark be able to deal with these two? And how will Zack and Mark deal with their mutual attraction?



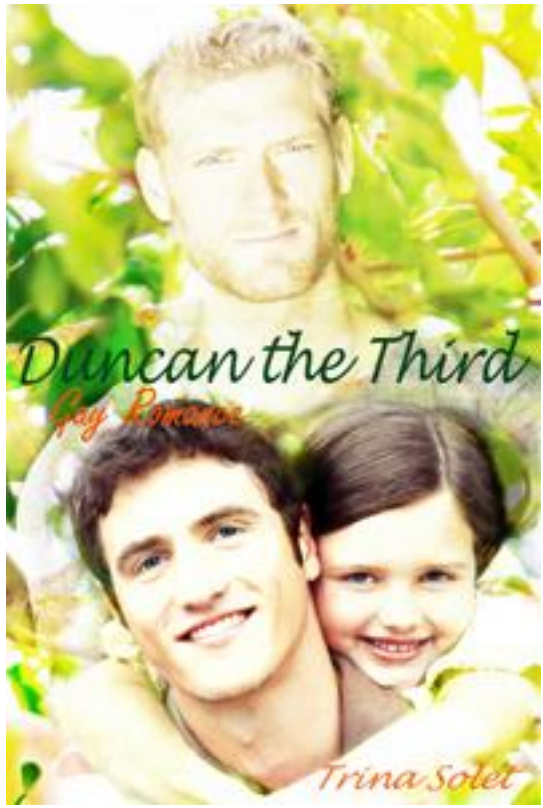
Unexpected Dad

Tyler finds a big surprise waiting on his doorstep. Ready or not, Tyler is a dad. Tyler didn't know he had a daughter until she suddenly dropped into his life. Whether he is ready for her or not, little Julie needs a father. Or maybe two. Tyler and Jake have been best friends, inseparable since college. Now they have to adjust to Tyler's new role as a dad. As Jake helps him cope with being a new father to a little girl, Tyler might be looking at two big changes in his life.



More Than a Manny

A very young, rich widower needs a nanny, but a hot manny would be even better. That's where Nate comes in. Brent is a loving but irresponsible father to two young children from a marriage of convenience. He needs Nate in his life, but how will Nate, a first time nanny, fit into his unconventional household? The kids are a handful, especially little Georgie. Her big brother, Ricky, has a few issues of his own. But Nate is more than ready to take on the challenge and let all three of them steal his heart.

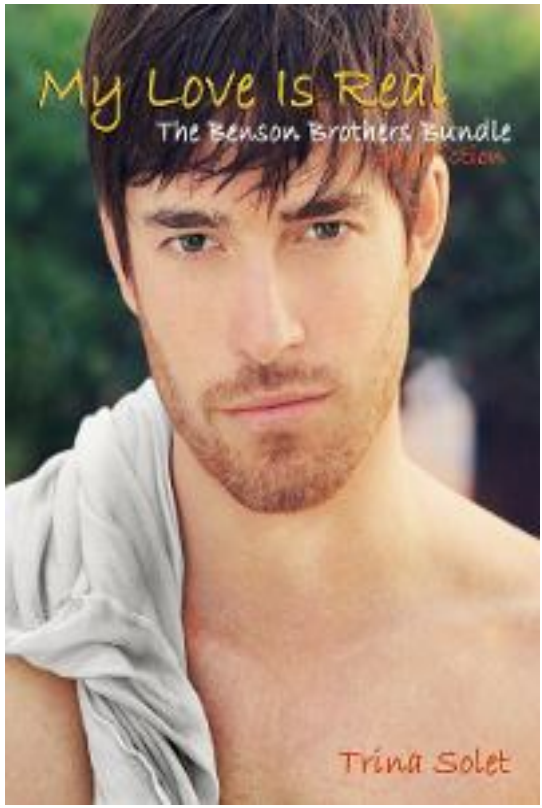


Duncan the Third

Patrick and his little sister, Wendy, have just moved into Duncan's building and that means trouble. Patrick is exactly the kind of guy Duncan can't resist. Together he and his little sister might be the family Duncan has been yearning for but only if he takes a chance and lets them into his heart. Unfortunately, Duncan hasn't been lucky when it comes to relationships. After getting his heart broken too many times, he has sworn off younger men. While Duncan struggles against his attraction to him, Patrick is determined to win him over. As Patrick tries to change his mind, can he also heal Duncan's broken heart?

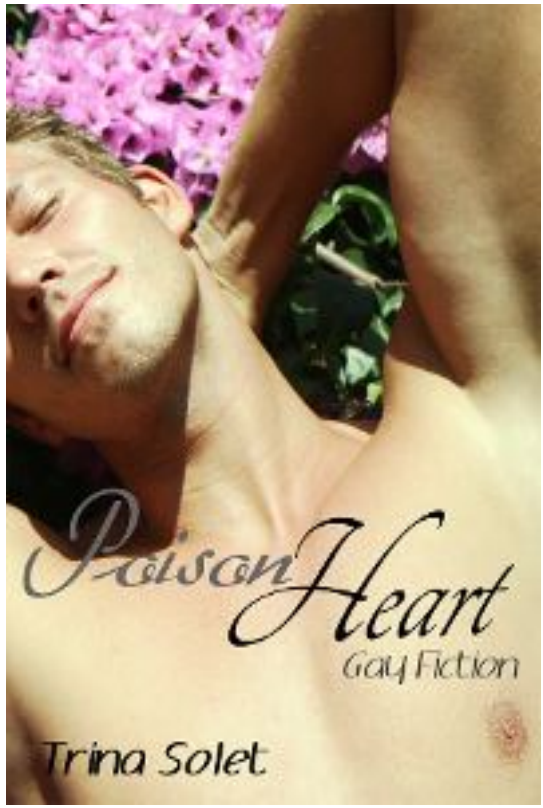
Make It Better

A favor leads to a life changing experience. Ray is willing to do anything for the man he considers his savior. His mission of mercy is Marcus, a young man who can't overcome his guilt over a tragedy in his past. Is Ray making a terrible mistake giving his heart to him, or will his love for Marcus be strong enough to save him?



My Love Is Real: The Benson Brothers Story

For almost a year Sean and Brian thought they were brothers. Sean wants him more than anything, but will Brian ever accept his love? His pride is only one of the obstacles standing in their way. A dangerous man has a claim on Brian.



Poison Heart

Is there anything Vince and Cal won't do for each other? The two of them grew up together and fell deeply in love. They were poor but happy until Cal made a big mistake and ended up in jail. He did it for Vince. To get him out, Vince is willing to do anything. Roland Granger has the power and influence to make Cal a free man. All he wants in return is Vince. Even if Cal never forgives him, Vince is willing to sacrifice himself. Now he has to make sure that Cal accepts this unwanted help. And while Vince is trying to set things right in his own life, can he reunite Roland with a self-destructive young man who loves him?